

Qualified and Equipped

Jeremiah 1:4-10

⁴ Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, ⁵ "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

⁶ Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." ⁷ But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you.

⁸ Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD."

⁹ Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth.

¹⁰ See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

This reading from Jeremiah narrates God's call to a prophet. So, what does it mean to be called by God? What does God generally call people to do? To whom does God issue this call? Do only ministers and priests experience a call to vocation, or is it an essential part of every Christian's religious life? What is the meaning of Christian calling or vocation? One thing to remember is that God calls each of us to live our lives as servants to God and to those around us, whether that is as a parent, mentor, teacher, preacher, or maybe, for some, it is how you serve in your vocation.

One of the challenges presented by the story of Jeremiah's calling is that it tempts us to think of vocation as something reserved for great figures of religious history—prophets, evangelists, and missionaries. However, Jeremiah's experience emphasizes that God calls every Christian to live the radical gospel of Christ through faithful obedience in the world. For some, that faithful obedience may require grand utterance, heroic measures, or world-changing actions. For others of us, it is in fulfilling the tasks of our social, political, and familial roles that we

stand as prophets in the cultural wilderness, testifying to God's intentions for the world in the way we live our lives.

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) defined vocation as "the event in which [persons are] set and instituted in actual fellowship with Jesus Christ, namely, in the service of His prophecy,... and therefore in the service of God and [their fellow human beings]." In other words, Christian calling is not just reserved for those asked to do mighty things. It is the invitation to every Christian to witness to the gospel by investing with radical grace whatever worldly roles God opens to us. John Calvin assured, "No task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight." As Martin Luther famously said about parenthood, when understood as Christian vocation, even changing dirty diapers is done for the glory of God!

Jeremiah's response to his call is particularly noteworthy. Jeremiah emphasized his inexperience and unsuitability for this kind of charge. Jeremiah resisted the call of God because he believed himself not up to the task. Jeremiah's reaction contrasts with the response of Isaiah, who after a momentary declaration of unsuitableness, embraced divine forgiveness and enthusiastically accepted his commission by stating: "Here am I, Lord; send me!" Isaiah's response reflects the courageous enthusiasm we expect from heroes and saints, whom we distinguish from ourselves. By his misgivings—which continued throughout the book of Jeremiah—Jeremiah is the "everyman's" or "everyone's" prophet; he shows us that fear, anxiety, resistance, inadequacy, even resentment are understandable reactions to the call to represent God in the world, and these feelings do not disqualify us from serving God's intentions.

So let me share my story of call. Since the age of about 10 years old I knew that God had something special for me to do. I heard that call at Christian camp. I thought as I listened to missionaries, home from Africa and Asia, that God was

calling me to the mission field. I read books about missionaries. However, I felt unqualified, and was sure God didn't want me to go alone. I thought about going to a Christian college, but none offered me scholarships, so I went to the University of Missouri. The only religion class offered was a comparison of the Gospels and the professor said the first day that it was about literature....not religion! Then life happened...studies, activities, friends, fraternal organizations...marriage and parenthood, and no, Leroy was not interested in being a missionary or living in a foreign country! God did give us a church home and I was a Sunday School teacher and active in other ways in the life of the church. In 1999 the regional minister, Morris Finch, called as asked if I would serve as the Women's Ministry coordinator, which opened additional opportunities for service.

Meanwhile, I was able to participate in the STEM (Systematic Training for Effective Ministry) with the region. It took me 4 years to complete a 2-year program, but they opened the door for busy people like me. When I finished I asked what was next and the dean refused to allow me to participate in the licensed ministry training. In 2004 I received an email inviting me to an open house about a stay at home seminary opportunity. God opened the door for us to pay about a third of the cost of seminary in the United States by attending a Canadian school, which was fully accredited shortly after we began studies. I did not have to leave home because classes were held less than 15 miles from my home. God even sent me a study companion! And Leroy made sure we had wholesome food while we studied. Meanwhile, the Regional Commission on Ministry asked to interview me and I was placed under-care as I studied and given financial assistance to pay for tuition and books. In 2008, before completing my studies, I was ordained into Christian ministry. In 2009 I graduated seminary and thought God wanted me to be an interim minister or supply preacher; one who preaches at various

congregations when the pastor is on vacation or away for other reasons. I did supply preaching in Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ congregations. That spring, I got excited, as Central Christian Church of Grand Rapids called as asked if I would be interested in them, but I later discovered they already had someone in mind. In September I received a call from Bill Parker to ask me to come to Unity so we could get to know each other. All the time God had been qualifying and equipping me for service here, at Unity Christian Church.

However, neither our achievement nor our confidence qualifies us to answer the call of God. Instead, it is *God* who prepares us to live out the vocation for which we were created. God's insistence to Jeremiah that "before I formed you in the womb I knew you" testifies to divine providence and election, in which the idea of vocation is rooted. Jeremiah's selection as prophet had nothing to do with his capabilities for the job (as Jeremiah himself repeatedly attested), but was made prior to his exhibiting any prophetic "qualities." God declared that the assignment of Jeremiah's role was made before he was able to do anything to merit his selection. As the English Puritan William Ames remarked, our calling "does not depend on the dignity, honesty, industry, or any endeavor of the ones called, but only upon the election and predestination of God."

Does this mean there is no correspondence between God's intentions for our lives and the abilities and predispositions we develop? The experience of prophets like Jeremiah and Moses also comes to mind, suggests not, but something is lost in assuming that God always calls us to be and do what does *not* come "naturally" to us. While God sometimes asks us to take up roles and responsibilities for which we may at the advent feel ill suited, often enough God prepares us for our calling *through* the interests and abilities we cultivate. Rather than insisting on a single form for divine calling, Jeremiah's story simply reminds us that both the calling to

serve and the capacity to fulfill that calling come from God. Verses 7-9 make this point vividly; God is acknowledged as the sudden source of Jeremiah's capability to fulfill his vocation.

The end of our scripture gives the specifics of Jeremiah's commission, to speak a word of judgment to Judah in the shadow of international threats. In our time, a couple of things are important about this commission. Against a view of religion as essentially a private matter, God put words into the mouth of the prophet that gave him authority "over nations and over kingdoms" The word of God is a dynamic force that at times stands in opposition to the inertia of culture and politics. Finally, while the overall tenor of Jeremiah's commission is judgment, the destructive imperatives were followed by a constructive pair; Jeremiah was appointed not only "to pluck up and to pull down" but "to build and to plant." Here we see the necessary cooperation between judgment and good news, essential to the gospel. Jeremiah was commissioned to take to God's people the message of death *and* rebirth—so that even in the forecast of judgment lies the promise of new life.

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