

God's Call and Our Inadequacy

Jeremiah 1:4-10

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Do you think God calls you to do things that are easy? If they were easy, why would you need a call? Why would you need God? You'd just do them. Most of the times, God calls us to do things that are downright impossible.

Jeremiah was not thrilled to be called by God to be a prophet. A biblical prophet, I'll remind you, is not primarily a predictor of the future but someone who speaks for God—including, generally, announcing that God is going to bring a terrible judgment on his people for being so unfaithful to him. You might think that Jeremiah would feel honored by being chosen, but he declines the job.

"Ah Lord God!" he says—a phrase that always leads to a complaint. "I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." It's hard to know exactly how young Jeremiah was. The word for "boy" usually means someone under ten, but he may have been a teenager. Maybe he really didn't know how to do public speaking, and maybe he was as afraid of it as most people. No doubt he felt inadequate to be God's spokesman in a world where there were professional prophets who worked for the king and told him what he wanted to hear.

But most scholars believe that Jeremiah was part of a priestly family that had to move from Jerusalem to a little village when their candidate for king lost out. So Jeremiah was a P.K. A P.K. being called to preach knows what he is getting into, so his first response is "Not me!" Will Willimon, retired bishop who teaches at Duke, wrote recently that while we know that God reaches out to help us in time of trouble, God also calls people to do God's work "and thereby God puts people *in* trouble." He goes on: "Jeremiah may be young...but he knows enough to know that when God shows up and comes into our lives, sometimes there are blessings and benefits; sometimes there is pain and trouble....Time and again in scripture, God seems to think nothing of placing otherwise contented, happy people's lives in peril." ["The Hardest Question" blog, August 19, 2013] Jesus, for one. And Jesus said that God would do it to those who follow him as well.

And yet, Jeremiah's call story says that it's useless to resist. God tells Jeremiah, "I called you before you were even born." I put you together and brought you into this world for a purpose. That's often our experience of discovering our calling: *This is why I was born. This is my reason for being.* But you don't know that when you are starting out. The usual story you hear from old preachers is that they wanted to do anything but preach, but God dragged them kicking and screaming into that work. I remember when I was in seminary and a recruiter from the Home Mission Board came to lunch offering summer jobs as "missionaries" in the US. He asked me what I wanted to do. I told him, "Anything but preach." "Well," he said, "then that's what you need to do." I wound up in Georgia for the summer preaching 3-7 sermons a week! The great preacher Fred Craddock nailed it when he said, "Receiving a call from God is a lot like throwing up...you can only put it off for so long."

But I don't think Jeremiah's story should be read as a call to professional ministry. Being a prophet wasn't an occupation that paid a salary. It just meant speaking the truth for God. Is there any Christian who isn't called to speak the truth for God? We are called to announce the good news of what God has already accomplished in the cross and resurrection. And we are also called—every one of us—to call people to repentance, to a change of mind and life, announcing God's reign in this world.

Sometimes that means predicting, as Jeremiah did, dire consequences for our nation if we do not change our ways.

“Calling” is not just a category for ministers. Some forms of Catholicism still teach a clear distinction between “religious” and “lay,” with much higher standards for priests, nuns, and monks than for the average lay person. But Baptists, like most Protestants, have never believed that. We believe in “the priesthood of all believers,” which means not only that we all have direct access to God, not only that we are priests to one another, but also that every believer is called to ministry. That ministry may be in a school or a business or on a ship or on a farm. We are all called to live for Christ in our own sphere of influence and to speak for God to our neighbors. Baptists believe that everyone has a calling—first the calling to salvation in Christ and to be part of the church, but also a particular calling to tasks in this world.

I read a sentence by the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann 30 years ago that has stuck with me: “Being in covenant [with God] transposes all identity questions into questions of vocation.” If we see our lives within the framework of a relationship with God, we will see the question of “Who am I?” as being answered by the question “What is God calling me to do?” We don’t start by navel-gazing and trying to “know thyself,” celebrating our uniqueness. We start by understanding who God is and what God’s purposes in this world are. As Jesus would say that, we seek God’s kingdom first. Once we have that framework, *then* we try to answer the question of who I was created to be. “Who am I?” is a question that finally can’t be answered in isolation, because there is a God who created you, who knew you in your mother’s womb and has a purpose for you—and that purpose fits in with God’s master plan for the world, the kingdom of God which we pray will come on earth as in heaven.

So if you are trying to figure out what God’s calling for you is—his calling for right now in your life—one place to start is by looking at your gifts and talents. God made you; what did he make you *for*? Some of our abilities are definitely in our DNA; God called us in that sense before we were born. And sometimes it makes sense to ask what you are good at, and what you enjoy doing. Often there are clues to your calling there. I like Frederick Beuchner’s statement: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet” [*Wishful Thinking*].

But there is another side to this question of finding your calling, and it’s the other side that is emphasized in Jeremiah’s story. Sometimes God calls us to tasks which are too big for us. Those God calls often feel inadequate to the task, and try to beg off. Jeremiah says he can’t speak because he is too young. The most obvious parallel in the Bible is the call of Moses, where Moses says that he isn’t a good speaker, that God should call his brother Aaron instead. When God calls Gideon to lead the army, he responds that his clan is the weakest and he is the youngest. When Saul is called to be king, he says, “But I’m from the smallest family in the smallest town”—like a kid from Block Island who can’t believe he could have any influence in the big world. The prophet Isaiah’s call story strikes me as a similar expression of inadequacy. When Isaiah sees God high and lifted up, even before the need for a messenger for God is mentioned, Isaiah says, “Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell among a people of unclean lips.” I am unacceptable even to be in God’s presence, much less to be his messenger.

To the extent that we see God clearly, and to the extent that we see clearly what God wants to accomplish, we will feel that we are inadequate. God wants to remake the world. God wants to set things right. God wants to draw all people to himself in faith. God wants the poor to flourish, the blind to see, and the prisoner to be set free. No, I can’t do that. I don’t see any point in even trying. But God will not accept our excuses or our feelings that we aren’t up to the task.

God says to Jeremiah, “Don’t say ‘I am only a youth’; for you *shall* go to all to whom I send you, and you *shall* speak whatever I command you.” It’s going to happen. You can do it because I never

call someone to a task without empowering them to do it. Paul says in Philippians 2:13 (NIV), “God is the one who enables you both to want and to actually live out his good purposes.”

God says to Jeremiah, “Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and I will rescue you.” God does not send you out on a mission alone; he’s got your back. It’s clear that if you speak for God, you will have enemies. Jesus told us as much. God’s word itself provokes defensiveness. But you don’t have to be afraid. Yes, you will get into trouble; Jeremiah landed in prison and in a pit, mocked by crowds, near death. But ultimately God rescued him.

God’s word which is given to Jeremiah was both destructive and constructive; most of his work was in the area of destroying and tearing down, but in the end he announced God’s plan to rebuild and replant. If you read what Jeremiah says in the rest of the book, you can understand why he was considered an enemy of the state. He had bad news for the country, like some people today who are not allowed to tell the truth about how bad things are in the government or in the environment. Yesterday many thousands marched to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington, and most people acknowledge Dr. King as the closest thing we have had to a 20th century prophet, but we forget that in 1963 most Americans did not approve of him. Certainly white Southerners saw him as a troublemaker and some saw him as a Communist rather than a Baptist preacher of nonviolence. If we tell the truth as God shows us the truth, we will upset somebody, maybe most people, but God will still be with us. God rescued Jeremiah, but he did not rescue Jesus or Dr. King or many other prophets; nevertheless, God’s word did not return void, it accomplished the purpose for which God sent it into the world.

I’m convinced that God normally calls us to tasks that are too hard for us. If the thing you feel called to is not too hard for you, you have to wonder if it is God calling. God’s purposes are big and he gives us God-sized tasks. God doesn’t ultimately choose you because of your abilities; if you have abilities suited to the task he has for you, it just means that he knew the task before he gave you the abilities. If you feel completely inadequate to accomplish the task you feel God is calling you to, so much the better. You will be less likely to be proud and more likely to depend on God. God has chosen to partner with us as his co-workers in bringing his kingdom to reality. He wants to work *together* with us—not by himself, and not leaving us on our own. There is a saying attributed to Desmond Tutu:

By himself, God won’t.

By ourselves, we can’t.

But together with God, we can.

I am not preaching today to many people who can beg off because they are too young, but some of you may try to beg off because you are too old. I’m not talking about answering God’s call as something that young people do when they are trying to figure out their career path. I think Jeremiah’s story poses a question to every one of us: “What are you called to do for the rest of your life?” Whatever part of your life is behind you, you still have the rest of your life. What does God want you to do with that?

There are two myths I want to knock down today: The first is that the idea of God’s call is only for preachers and missionaries. God has a calling for you, a vocation for the next part of your journey. The second myth is that we stop working for God when we retire from employment. You never retire from God—even when you die. Retirement is a 20th century invention, and for many people it is a social construct that leads to depression because you are no longer giving yourself away for something meaningful.

You may be tired of hearing about my late father, but when he hit mandatory retirement at work, he started asking what God’s calling was for him *now*. He and my mother went to Japan for a couple of years. When he came back, he started a nonprofit in his basement importing Japanese Sunday School

literature and reselling it to churches all over the country. He consulted with Japanese pastors and taught English to Japanese workers and spouses around Nashville. He volunteered to tutor at a public school where kids were falling behind. He said yes to leadership roles in his retirement community and in his church. Frankly, I think that's why he stayed healthy until he was 93, and why he never seemed depressed about aging.

So what is God calling you to do for the rest of your life? Don't say, "I can't do that. It's too hard for someone my age." Just listen to discern if it really God calling you to a task, then remember his promise to be with you. God can put words in your mouth. God can put love in your heart. God can give you strength you do not have on your own.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo asks Gandalf, "Why was *I* chosen?" Gandalf replies, "Such questions cannot be answered. You may be sure that it was not for any merit that others do not possess. But you have been chosen, and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have." And I would add: God who chose you will give you strength and heart and wits to do the thing you have been chosen to do.