
CALLINGS

JEREMIAH 1:4-10

**A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, JANUARY 30, 2022,
BY THE REV. DR. LUKE A. POWERY**

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah. He didn't pray for it. He didn't send a decorated paper invitation in priority mail from the post office on ancient near eastern street. I can't believe he didn't even crowdsource a question on Facebook or Twitter for it. The word of the Lord just came like it does for prophets as when the word of the Lord came to John the Baptist in the wilderness. The word of the Lord just came to Jeremiah unexpectedly, which is how it usually comes, without warning.

You're out sipping a tea and having lunch at Fosters on 15/501 or tending to your backyard garden or on a break from work at Duke Hospital in the cafe or fishing in the ocean at the Outer Banks or feeding the dog or studying in Perkins library for an exam and the word of the Lord comes. This is how it is for Moses when he was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, for David when he was taking care of smelly sheep, for Mary who was having a routine day in Nazareth. The word of the Lord just comes when you least expect it. This is how it is, even for us.

The word of the Lord came. God calls. God pronounces. God appoints. God sends. "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." "You did what? Appointed me to do what where? God, I'm pretty content doing what I'm doing right where I am doing it for the last twenty years. I don't need to move. I don't need to make any changes in my life or calendar."

But the word of the Lord came, the word of the Lord comes, ready or not. And often it is not because we can't out-strategize, out-think, out-plan or out-imagine God. That's why God calls and we don't call ourselves to God's redemptive mission.

But to this pronouncement over our lives, to this call of God, how do we respond? Jeremiah responds this way "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." Normally, in the scriptures, you don't see people jumping up and down in the face of God, saying, 'Choose me! Choose me!' There's usually some hesitation involved and more like, 'Not me, God, not me!' When the call comes, our response might be, 'God, you're nuts!'

But in one way, Jeremiah is honest and transparent—I do not know how to speak. I do not know. And so many of our callings and the life of faith in general are about not knowing. We don't know as much as we think we know and there's a place for this incomprehensibility in the life of faith. Like prophet Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones, when God asks him can the bones live, he responds, 'O Lord, you know.' Jeremiah doesn't know, but God does. "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you..." God knows us intimately, yet God still calls.

Yet our self-perception can get in the way of God's promises for our lives, which are ultimately for the redemption of the world. "I do not know how to speak for I am only a boy." If you want to undercut your life, make insecurity an idol, and get in the way of what God wants to do, use that deadly phrase—"I am only." "I am only a boy." 'I am only' means you don't think too highly of yourself. I am only means you only see a lack in your life, deficiencies, but not your holy, helpful gifts. I am only a virgin according to Mary who eventually gives birth to Jesus. I am only slow of speech and slow of tongue according to Moses who led the children of Israel out of Egypt. 'God, I am only a first-generation college student in my family. I am only from a small rural town of five hundred people with one stop light in it. I am only a homemaker. I am only a bass in the choir and not a tenor. I am only a Tarheel and not a Blue devil.'

That phrase—I am only-- will constrict your life when how we see ourselves is not how God sees us, which is why God calls us and we don't call ourselves! God's voice gives us our vocation. And vocation is not a goal or career I pursue but a calling I hear. Our perceived limits don't limit God; that's why God calls us even when knowing us deeply. We may say, 'I am only' but God responds, 'Remember, I am. Don't limit yourself because I am limitless!' What did the angel tell Mary? "Nothing will be impossible with God."

So don't get satisfied with sailing your little boat far inside the harbor bar to box in your life and by doing so, box in God and what God wants to do with your life. Our little lives can be used by our large God to go out where the big ships float, out into the deep where the great ones are. God's call is bigger than the vision we have for ourselves. God's call is for the vast kingdom of God. God's call is "a crown placed over our heads that for the rest of our lives we are trying to grow tall enough to wear" (Howard Thurman). The call is beyond who we are to who we are becoming—for the nations—expanding our imagination and influence beyond the confines of our own little context. The vision of ourselves is often too small for the call of God, so it's not unusual for us to say like Jeremiah, "I can't." But when God calls you, God says, 'I can, so yes, you can' because that's who God uses in the world—inadequate, unequipped, insecure, unknowing, unprepared, unwise, weak, afraid, quirky, finite individuals, just like us.

We are in good company, not because we're in this together with each other as the body of Christ but because God is with us on the Christian journey. 'I am only' is no match for the word that comes from God to Jeremiah, 'I am with you.' "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'...[and] Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you...." God knows that we can be afraid of the calling with all of its unknowns and uncertainties, twists and turns, but God promises his presence to accompany us in the calling. 'I call you. I send you. I am with you.'

And who God calls, God equips. God provides what's needed for the calling. God gives Jeremiah the words to say from his mouth. And by doing this, God reveals that God will put inside of us what we need to fulfill our callings—the words, the courage, the hope, the strength, the dreams, the wisdom, the joy, the patience. When God calls you, God puts the resources you need inside of you. God never leaves those he calls alone but is as close as the words in our mouths and the word made flesh in Jesus Christ.

Even when Jesus was fulfilling his call, we learn that the ones who were amazed by him were the same ones who were eventually filled with rage because of him. Living out the call of God won't be easy and it can be dangerous as they wanted to throw Jesus off of a cliff. A calling may not give you the life that you asked for, but it will give you the life you always hoped for, through every struggle, through all the questions, through opposition and tensions, through the uncertainties we may face, through masks, vaccinations, and a pandemic. Jesus shows us that God is with us in the face of the praise and the rage, the good days and the bad days we may encounter in our callings.

It makes sense that God tells Jeremiah not to be afraid, especially since the purpose of his call was to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." No wonder people would get angry and upset, even full of rage. His call includes deconstruction and that is difficult work; this is how we often think about a prophet's task, isn't it? The tough word. Exposing powers. Protests. Tearing down. Overthrowing. Deconstructing.

But the call, even the prophetic call, is more holistic and holy than that. There is also the construction aspect of the call. We often forget 'to build and to plant' is also a prophet's calling, is also our calling, wherever we are and whatever we are called to do.

So what is God constructing, building, planting in and through you this season? That is the ultimate end of God's call on our lives—to build and to plant. God calls us to not only pluck up but to plant hope and newness this year. As the hymn writer, our very own Zeb Highben writes, "The hope that calls us leads us on to new horizons: life beyond this night of sorrow, toil, and pain, as sunlight beckons after rain."

The sunlight of God is beckoning. The hope of Christ is speaking. The Holy Spirit is calling. And I pray you're listening and then answering: "Here am I, send me."