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# THE ESTIMATION OF GOD

JEREMIAH 1:4-10

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

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You have been called to Duke, at least this morning. A call is not a goal you pursue, but a voice you hear and it may come when you least expect it. “The word of the Lord came” to Jeremiah. He didn’t ask for it. He didn’t read a book about it. He wasn’t hallucinating because he pulled an all-nighter for that final exam. The word of the Lord just came. A call came to this boy, not a major world leader or CEO of a Fortune 500 company. A boy. And Jeremiah can’t believe it.

“Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” Jeremiah does what we often do. We limit ourselves. We doubt ourselves. We foreground what we don’t do, rather than highlight what we can do. And there’s a four-letter word that we should be very careful not to use—and that word is ‘only.’ I am only a boy. ‘Only’ can be such a self-defeating word. I am only a first-year student. I am only from a rural community. I am only a retired school teacher. I am only a volunteer. I am only.

19<sup>th</sup> century evangelist Jarena Lee wrestled with self-doubt too when she was called by God. In her autobiography she writes that she her the sound of a voice “which I thought I distinctly heard, and most certainly understood, which said to me, ‘Go preach the Gospel!’ I immediately replied aloud, ‘No one will believe me.’” Notice that immediately, there’s the hesitancy. Immediately after the call, Jeremiah says, “I don’t know how to speak. I’m only a boy.”

But the Lord tells Jeremiah, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy.’” Often, we don’t see who we truly are and what’s possible in and through us. Others may see it and God most definitely can see it, but not us. Instead, we walk around our workplace or on the Julian Abele quad or in our dorm room late at night and keep repeating the defeating phrase, “I am only” this or that because we don’t see what God sees in us. It’s like what Parker Palmer teaches in his book on vocation, *Let Your Life Speak*—that sometimes we limit ourselves by living someone else’s life or a life someone else thinks we ought to live, rather than our own life. We play it safe because that four-letter word has taken over our lives and we are ‘only’ who we think we are and only stress our weaknesses like Jeremiah. “I don’t know how to speak. I am only a boy.” Sometimes the life that wants to live in us may not be the life we are currently living. The word ‘only’ will make you do that. Jeremiah only saw that he was a boy and nothing else.

In the movie, *Lion King*, Mufasa tells his son Simba, when he’s wrestling with his call to be king, “Remember who you are.” Someone else could see it in him but Simba couldn’t see himself as a king. Jeremiah couldn’t see that he was a prophet to the nations.

This way of dealing with the call of God, the self-doubt and self-questioning, has biblical precedence. According to the scriptures, this is totally normal! When Moses is called by God to bring the Israelites out of Egypt, he says, “I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” When Jonah is called to go to Nineveh and cry out against it, he flees to Tarshish and heads in another direction. When Mary is called to give birth to Jesus, she says, “How can this be since I am virgin?” In the biblical call narratives, we really don’t see anyone jumping up and down in the face of God screaming to God saying, “Choose me! Choose me!” So often, it is, ‘not me, Lord, pretty please, not me.’ Even Jesus as he faces the agony of the cross says, “Take this cup from me.” When God calls, this human hesitancy is what is normative. Jeremiah’s response is a normal faithful reaction to God’s call. I am only a boy. Self-questioning happens as part of the call. If not, one might question whether the call of God is even genuine.

A young seminary preacher was invited to preach at a large First Baptist Church. And the young preacher went up to the pulpit with his chest stuck out and he was full of assurance (I’ve seen some of these students in the past!). He just knew he would ‘wow’ the congregation. But to his surprise no one was moved by what he prepared to say. This young preacher stepped out of the pulpit with his head hung low. And as he was coming down, an old church mother tapped him on the shoulder and said, “Son, if you had went up like you come down, you’d come down like you went up!”

When someone is called by God their first words are often “I can’t!”, not with their chest out saying, “I can.” If you thought you could you wouldn’t be who God thinks you should be! When we think we can, maybe it’s not a call, but when we think we can’t, it might be the very call of God on our lives because when you think you can’t, remember God can.

This is what God tries to teach Jeremiah. I formed you. I knew you. I consecrated you. I appointed you. I am with you. I have put my words in your mouth. In other words, I can. The call of God is about God. The call is the big deal. God is the big deal, not us. Our small estimation of ourselves doesn’t make God small. Like the Spiritual says,

*My God is so high  
You can't get over Him;  
So wide  
You can't get around Him;  
So low  
You can't get under Him...*

We may underestimate ourselves—“I am only”—but this doesn’t mean we have to underestimate God. Our perceived limitations do not limit the work of God in and through us for the blessing of the world.

Jeremiah might have only seen himself as a boy with speech limitations but God saw him as a prophet to the nations. And this is how and who God calls. “Not many [who] were wise by human standards, not many [who] were powerful, not many [who] were of noble birth.” God chooses the foolish, the weak, the low, little children. God can take a small mustard seed and it spring up like a whole kingdom. God takes what is deemed too little or too much or too old or too outdated or too simple and fulfills divine purposes. Five smooth stones for David took down Goliath. And one little baby started a revolution of global salvation from a Bethlehem manger.

This is the nature of the call of God. God’s voice calls us forth to become who God desires us to be for the world. The call of God is about what God wants to do in the world for God’s redemptive purposes. The call of God is larger than your own life but it includes your life.

So this academic year, God is calling you to be more than what you think you are—I am only. You might see limits but God sees unlimited potential in you because God calls you not for who you are now, but toward who you will be. God calls you into becoming something more than you ever imagined. Jeremiah never imagined he would be a prophet over nations and kingdoms. It was more than who he thought he was but it was who God called him to be in his mother’s womb.

We may have a low estimation of ourselves and of God, but God sees us for who we really are and who we will be and calls us to be more than we think or imagine is possible. God has a high estimation of who we can be. God calls us into becoming—whether it be prophets or poets or photographers or painters or palliative care specialists or pediatricians or pathologists or paralegals or park rangers or petroleum engineers or professional pianists or let’s not forget, even preachers.

In life, it is normal to say, “I am only” this or that and doubt ourselves. But don’t allow your underestimation of yourself to be an underestimation of God. When God calls, it is true that you can’t, but God can. And that’s the point.

I formed you. I knew you. I consecrated you. I appointed you. I am with you. When God calls, God equips, so don’t be afraid. God will give you exactly what you need at Duke this year to fulfill the call just like God did with Jeremiah—I will put my words in your mouth.

And who knows? You came as only a Duke student, but in God’s eyes, you might actually be a prophet.