

“The Call is for You!”
Sermon Preached by Jennifer Miles
Central Presbyterian Church
January 31, 2010
Scripture: Jeremiah 1:4-10

Let us pray: Ever present Lord, I hope that I may faithfully interpret and speak Your message for us today and may Your Spirit fill us so that we are inspired to be and do what is needed to further harmony in creation. Amen.

Jeremiah. Just a boy, an adolescent. And he is given his call, his purpose in life. To prophesie God’s Message to the nations.

Let me tell you a little about the time that Jeremiah lived. He was born at the end of the reign of King Josiah, who was a wonderful King of Judah. One who goes down in history as very faithful to God, a reformer King. He led by example and inspired people to adjust their behavior and attitudes to those that pleased God.

But, Josiah died in battle with the Egyptian Pharaoh Necho, and then Josiah’s son, King Jehoikim, took over. He was an Egyptian sympathizer and not a King with the high moral and spiritual values of his father. Without the God centered leadership of Josiah, the people of Judah became complacent in the relatively good times, not feeling particularly inspired to be as faithful to God as they had been. And as happens when greedy and selfish attitudes become socially accepted and rewarded, the vulnerable became more vulnerable. The poor were even more desperate as the chasm between them and the rich grew. And if you’re familiar with any of the bible, you know this tends to make God rather unhappy. You must take care of the widows and the orphans or bad things happen.

Just over the horizon, there loomed Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian empire, who would soon come to control Judah, then eventually completely destroy Jerusalem, and the Temple, and sending most of the Jewish people into exile, forced to live in a foreign land, with foreign language, culture and religion. Banished from the Promised Land and seemingly separated from their God.

But at the time of Jeremiah’s call, none of this had happened yet. And no one really expected such tragedy to ever occur. But God saw where things were headed and God chose Jeremiah to warn the people what would happen if they didn’t stop their destructive behavior, and listen to what God was saying.

This was a very difficult responsibility for Jeremiah. He had to say such horrible things to his people about what the future held for them. Things like

“Because of the sins of your shrines throughout your borders, I will make your rampart a heap in the field, and all your treasures will spoil. You will forfeit, by your own act, the inheritance I have given you; I will make you a slave to your enemies in a land you have never known. For you have kindled the flame of My wrath which shall burn for all time, Thus said the Lord”

It pained Jeremiah deeply to be the bearer of such dismal prophecies. Unlike Moses, who prophesied freedom of his people and the promise of a land which they could call their own, Jeremiah was threatening a life of forced servitude with the precious gift of the land of milk and honey ripped away from them. "To pluck up and pull down."

The vision is brutal and apocalyptic, but, the scholar Clements says that Jeremiah is a harbinger of hope. The hope he illustrates is that God is still speaking to them. Through all the apostasy, injustice, greed and apathy to the poor that the people have exhibited, God has not abandoned them. Using the strongest, most colorful language, God tries to shock them into seeing the reality they are creating. This is not a vengeful, violent God bent on punishing people. Not at all. This is a loving, committed, deeply involved Lord who wants to lead the people out of the pit of despair that they threw themselves in and into a life which is ruled by justice and fidelity.

God wants us all to be happy, but, we have to listen. I don't know how many times my parents said that to me and I have said that to my daughter. Listen, please listen, are you listening? There is very little so frustrating for a parent than to watch their child run head on into circumstances caused by a poor decision made while ignoring wise guidance. Or even worse, when you yourself view in hindsight what has led you to a bad situation and it is due to your not listening to the right voices. If I had a nickel for every time that has happened to me, I'd be taking you all out to brunch today.

The point is, God is always speaking to us. But, we have to make the effort to be open to this influence. To feel the guidance of the Spirit and to respond.

In the class that I have led the past couple of weeks, we have discussed the Holy Spirit, what it is, what it does and how following it can transform our lives. It starts with baptism and acknowledging the movement of the Spirit within and accepting God's call into service. As our faith matures we hopefully become more aware that the gifts God gives us can help us discern our call and are to be used for the flourishing of creation.

There are a multitude of calls in our lives. There is the biggie, the call to vocation. What are you supposed to do in this life? What is your purpose? That is a question that has challenged people forever. Knowing one's call can bring great joy and satisfaction. Being unable to determine a purpose can lead to pessimism and depression. There are those who discover their call at an early age, like Jeremiah or Rev Colby. Then there are people like me, for whom it can take decades to discern. When I told my mother what this sermon was to be about, she said I should be able to give a good one, because it sure took me long enough to answer my call.

Soren Kierkegaard, Danish theologian and Philosopher of the nineteen century, agonized most of his short life over what his purpose was. One of his greatest realizations was that one must truly know one's self, dig deep, without rationalizations or societal expectations, discover what one's true strengths and weakness are and only then with that knowledge can one move forward and be of use. This discipline can help us avoid wasting a talent or skill. It also can prevent frustration that comes with being in the wrong field. Your mother may have wanted you to be a lawyer, but, if you have gifts which are more suited to a master gardener, that is where you will best serve God. You will be happier and the fruits of your fulfilling labor will be much more beneficial and abundant to all around you. We can be grateful to Martin Luther for championing the opinion that all people are called to their vocation, not just priests or nuns. Every job has a purpose and is needed, and when done well is a way

to faithfully serve God and creation. In God's eyes, no call is of more importance or of higher status than another.

There are calls which to us come daily. Nudges that move us to certain actions or to say specific things. In Jeremiah it says, "The Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me, "Now I have put My words into your mouth." Can you remember a time when you were aware of this happening to you? When you followed or when you missed the opportunity? Was it hard to trust the influence? Sometimes the instructions may seem irrational or strange. Jeremiah could certainly relate to that. He had to learn to trust the influence and even though he did realize his call early on, it was a continual process for him, working to become ever more reliant upon God, honing his skills to feel and hear the messages, and strengthening his endurance and courage during the times when it was most difficult and frightening to be led by the Spirit.

Jeremiah ended up in a pit or prison more than once for his spreading God's message. It is during one the times that he was enjoying the hospitality of the dungeon, when he performed my favorite work of hope by being led to do something very illogical. Babylon had conquered Jerusalem and people were either being exiled or were running in terror from Judah. Everything was crashing down and despair filled hearts of almost all. It was then that God told Jeremiah to buy some land. The next day, a relative of Jeremiah's showed up at the prison, on his way out of town, and asked if Jeremiah wanted to buy his land. Jeremiah knew this was the opportunity that God had been talking about, so he unhesitatingly paid his cousin. Word spread. Jeremiah, God's prophet had bought local land! This meant that the Promise land was not lost forever, God would not abandon them, a new future with hopeful possibilities would come. "To build and to plant."

Part of listening is the discipline of being mindful and slowing down so that important moments are not missed or opportunities lost.

I read a story about a little boy, around eight years old, whose father was overseas in Iraq. The child became consumed with creating battle plans and strategies for the soldiers. He wrote them down and gave them to his mother, asking her to give them to an officer so that these plans could help the soldiers to stay safe. She took them, never really intending to do that, but, wanting him to believe that she took him seriously. Not too far in the future, she attended a fundraiser and coincidentally met a general in the army. In their conversation she mentioned her son's passion. The general asked if he could have the plans. The next day he called and asked that she bring her son to his office. What an exciting yet intimidating experience that must have been for the child. What happened next would make a huge difference in the psyche of that boy at such an impressionable and sensitive time in his life. The general greeted him with respect and treated him as a valued consultant. He thanked the boy for his insightful strategies and assured him that his efforts would greatly assist the soldiers in Iraq and help to keep them safe.

That this general immediately made time in his busy schedule to give such assurance and encouragement to that vulnerable boy has the hint of divine touch to me.

In my Holy Spirit class we discussed how difficult it can be at times to really know what voice belongs to the Spirit and what voice should be repressed. There is a voice which I fear gets in the way far too often with many of us. The voice of insecurity. This is the voice that tells you are not smart enough, or old enough or worthy enough to do what you are called to do.

I am reminded of an old *Northern Exposure* episode where one of the characters is called to be a shaman, but, his insecurity causes him all kinds of problems. This insecurity is portrayed as a small green creature which laughs at him from the sidelines, heckling him and trying to tear holes in his confidence and get him to abandon his work. While he is under the influence of the green monster the ramifications of his self-doubt not only affect him, but, the entire community, because the work he was called to do does not get done.

Jeremiah's first reply to God's call was one of insecurity. "Ah Lord, I don't know how to speak, for I am only a boy."

God brushed that excuse away. "Do not say, I am only a boy. For you shall go to all whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid for I am with you."

Earlier God had said to him, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Before you were born, I consecrated you." We may struggle our whole lives to know ourselves, but God already and has always known everything about us. When God calls, it is because we are uniquely suited to do the work and in the right place to do so. You may spend a moment wondering why you are called to something, but, don't waste too much time and don't say no. The call is for you.

Amen.