

Psalm 71:1-6

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Evie Macway

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Call

Our holy scripture, the Bible, that text we as Christians hold to be God's Word for us yesterday, today and tomorrow, is full of call stories. And no two are just alike. There's Abraham and Sarah, 'your ancestors will be more than the stars in the sky.' There is Moses at the burning bush. Then there is Jonah, who resisted so much he ended up in the belly of a whale, but eventually got the message.

We read the call stories of Elijah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Samuel. In the New Testament we have Mary, all of Jesus' disciples and Paul, not to mention the innumerable people Jesus touched and healed who understood their experience with him as their own call story. It would appear, based on the frequency and variety of these stories in our scripture, that this call and response that goes on between God and God's creatures is an extremely important dimension of a life of faith.

Some things haven't changed.

This week, as I pondered this story of the call of Jeremiah I found myself appreciating the frequency and diversity of the call stories in scripture, and probably even more so, the *value* the scriptures seems to place on these stories. Call stories get a lot of *air time* in the Bible. I would venture to guess that they get a lot of 'air time' in our own hearts and minds as well. I know they do in mine.

How often do you find yourself wondering, "God, is that you?" in the midst of the events and the choices of your life? How often do you hear God's voice or see God's hand in your life and wrestle with how you will respond?

Our own stories may not be as grand as those we read of in scripture, no bushes burning without being consumed, no time spent in the belly of a whale, no immaculate conceptions, or blinding lights come down from heaven. Or maybe some of our stories are just about that bold. But, bold or gentle, I would imagine that most of us if asked, could tell of a time when we have heard God's call in our lives.

I find it comforting and not a little challenging to read the stories, like Jeremiah's, of others who have heard God's call, wrestled and responded, for the light those stories shed on my own wrestlings and responses.

Jeremiah's calling, as he recounts it in the verses we read this morning, leans toward the bold and dramatic. He almost certainly gives this account in hindsight. This is how he sees that moment years before, when his life changed direction and he became the person he has been all these years. This is his understanding of his call from God, through the lenses of years spent living out that calling.

It happens that way sometimes doesn't it? It is after we have lived a decision or a calling that we see most clearly God's work in us and through us. As bold and dramatic and certain as Jeremiah's story comes across here, I think he gives us, in this telling, some hints, some insights into his wrestlings and responses to that call, and therefore, maybe also some insights into our own.

In my reflection and study on this passage this week I found four dimensions of Jeremiah's account here that shed light on my own experiences of call. I would like to share those four with you this morning. I am sure there are more here but these spoke to me now in the context of our lives today.

First, there is background. Jeremiah was born into a priestly family who had been displaced years earlier by King Solomon. Surely around the dinner tables and when he sat in worship and listened to his family members speak, he heard of the injustices they had witnessed and experienced at the hands of the politically powerful of their day. Walter Brueggemann, who has written extensively on the prophets explains the significance of Jeremiah's family background:

“The importance... is that this family of priests... had long been opposed to the ostentatious self-indulgence of the Davidic house in its trajectory of economic-military autonomy on which Solomon had set it. This means that Jeremiah was a product and representative of a theology grounded in hostility to the Davidic establishment that is both very old and very deep.”¹

Jeremiah's family had a history of oppression by the House of David dynasty. We are a product of our upbringing. Jeremiah, in his ministry spoke extensively, and loudly against the established powers of his day and the injustices they practiced.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 30. From <http://www.workingpreacher.org>, commentary by Alphonetta Wines.

Given his background, it seems likely that Jeremiah's call to ministry was a call to make public what he had for his whole life felt in his heart.

Our life experiences shape us. They are a part of who we are and they give us our passions and shape our callings. **God uses who we are to help us to become the people we can be.** "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." (Jeremiah 1:5) It was Jeremiah, the whole of him, that God called.

Then there is timing. There is a well known verse from the book of Esther in which the priest, Mordecai comes to Queen Esther, a Jew who has risen to the position of queen, and asked her to go and speak to the king on behalf of the Jewish people of the kingdom. The people were being persecuted and Esther was in a position to help. In effect Esther is the only one who can save the people from persecution and death. As Esther is struggling with whether to risk speaking up to the king Mordecai says to her, "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

This was Jeremiah's time. Jeremiah lived during a *time of transition* for the Jewish people and the whole region in which he lived. Jeremiah's ministry spanned the reign of five kings following the time of David and Solomon. He spoke of reform and preached in the midst of war, exile and captivity. As one commentator put it, "Jeremiah will pronounce the death of one world and the birth of another."²

"See, *today* I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow..." (Jeremiah 1:10) That was a mighty calling, but it was Jeremiah's time. People by necessity, were trying to figure out just who they were as a people, which meant that Jeremiah's critique was both urgent and necessary.³ Sometimes we come to situation, a place in time that is our time. It is our voice that is needed, our passion, our compassion, our courage, our faith.

A third dimension of Jeremiah's call I hear here is that of ambivalence. This is not, and was not to be, an easy task and it turned out to be worse than Jeremiah imagined.

² Louis Stulman, *Jeremiah* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 42 from Alphonetta Wines, <http://www.workingpreacher.org>.

³ Alphonetta Wines, <http://www.workingpreacher.org>.

“Ah Lord, truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” (Jeremiah 1:6)
This is a common thread in most all of the call stories in scripture, and I am sure, a common thread in our own as well. ‘But, God you don’t really mean me.’ How will I do what you wish me to do?

The book of Jeremiah is somewhat unique among the prophetic books in that the author repeatedly makes reference to this ambivalence. Our calls are so often not a smooth path. Jeremiah affirms this. Jeremiah complains of being a mocked and criticized (20:7) and like Job, laments the day he was born. Jeremiah struggled with his calling.

Which brings me to a fourth dimension of call that I hear in Jeremiah’s story this morning. A deepening faith. Jeremiah was most certainly a man of faith when he first heard God’s call. But it was as he responded to that call, grappled with his own questions, lived that faith among the people, cried out to God in frustration and in faith that that faith grew. “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.” (Jeremiah 1:10)

As difficult as Jeremiah’s call was, to preach destruction, plucking up and pulling down, to preach dramatic and difficult change, Jeremiah came to see and to preach building and planting as well. He could, and did, see that the injustice and the suffering would not be the last word. That God would not give up on the people. *That change was necessary. That change was difficult, but that death and destruction is not the last word.* Jeremiah reminds us I think, that it is often as we grapple with the the hard questions, struggle with the most difficult callings, that our faith deepens, that we too can see and proclaim planting and building... life and hope.

That call and response that goes on between God and God’s creatures is an extremely important dimension of lives of faith. We know it well. This morning, as we are living our calls right now maybe Jeremiah’s experiences can speak to us.

How is who you are, the families into which you were born, the lives you have lived creating your passions, opening your ears and your hearts to God’s call, and equipping you to respond?

How is this your time and my time? Where are you and I, maybe we together called *today*?

What are we afraid of? What makes our calling difficult?

And what makes them good? What makes our callings life giving, faith strengthening?

Jeremiah says, “Now the word of the Lord came to me saying...” The word of the Lord continues to come. Thanks be to God.