

Epiphany 4, January 31 2016 St. Augustine's, Freeland. Nigel Taber-Hamilton
Jeremiah 1:4-10, 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, Luke 4:21-30

I have a friend who's father is a retired United Methodist minister. He told me once that his dad used to call his parishioners on the telephone and when they answered, he'd say "This is the Lord." Of course, it started out as a joke, and pretty soon, everyone knew it wasn't really The Lord but his father calling. But, my friend said, it turned out that when "The Lord" called, the people who got the call were not all that thrilled, because they found out that "the Lord" was only calling because he wanted them to do something!

Sounds not only a great deal like Jeremiah's initial response, but, I suspect, a lot like most of ours, as well! Overlay these two stories and what do you get?

"Who is this again? The Lord?? Ah! Lord God! Good to hear from you. Yes, well, I appreciate the thought, I really do, but the truth is, I think you're calling the wrong person. Why don't you try somebody who is younger than I, somebody with more energy, someone who really has their act together and say so? Why don't you call somebody else?"

The folks in Nazareth would have nodded their heads! Remember last week: "All spoke well of him." Until, of course, he started asking them to "put up or shut up!"

God's call is, of course, always directed at someone else. Anyone else. Right?!!!!

Okay, we all know in our heart-of-hearts that that's simply not so – at least I hope you all know in your heart-of-hearts that that's not so!!

Could it be, then, a little like the Book of Judges? Individuals are called out from the midst of the community to fill specific tasks - in that case, leadership tasks - but then they get to go back home after they've fulfilled their duty and return to their regular lives. You might say that that's the "George Washington" model – he certainly planned to go back to Mt. Vernon after the Revolutionary War.

Except that he didn't. Honoring the call was, for him – and, I should say, for the people of the Book of Judges – a life-long thing.

Once God grabs you, there's no retirement. God's call is never about limits – it's much more a dialogue that goes on throughout our lives, a part of an intimate relationship between each of us and God. The work may change, the mission may be different, the ministry may vary, but God's call, once issued, is constant.

That's certainly the tale of Jeremiah – his writings tell us that came to Jeremiah again and again, all throughout his life, and each time it was about something different.

Of course, Jeremiah accepted this with good spirits and thanks, right?? Well, no! On occasion he sounded a lot like whining Jonah. He complained to God about what he thought was unfair, asking the sort of pointed questions we all ask:

“Why do bad people have it so good? Why do con artists make it big? You planted them and they put down roots. They flourished and produced fruit. They talk as if they’re old friends with you, but they couldn’t care less about you. Meanwhile, you know me inside and out. You don’t let me get by with a thing! Make them pay for the way they live....!” (Jeremiah 12:1b-2 The Message)

And behind those questions there always lurks another: “why me?” When we enter into a relationship there are always questions, questions, questions!! Same with God. And they’re legitimate questions, too.”

This may not come as a surprise to you, but I can tell you that my seminary education left me unprepared to answer Jeremiah’s questions about the apparent injustice of human existence. In my first years as a priest – now 35 years ago – I was in my office working when a call came in. It was about a wonderful 18 year-old young woman – the apple of their eye of an active, delightful couple at the church I served. She had just been killed by a drunk driver (who escaped that crash without a scratch). I was both profoundly grateful that I *was* called to come and be with those parents, and also a little bit angry with God, since I had no experience of what I should say or do. “Why me, O Lord, why me?” I can tell you that the old saw that “God never gives us more than we can handle” – isn’t true.

Jeremiah’s story actually tells us that we’ll be able to handle stuff....God never said “you can handle it, Jeremiah.” What God said was “Don’t be afraid, Jeremiah – I’m in there with you.”

That’s consistently what the bible – and our faith – says to us. That’s the meaning of Jesus – of “incarnation” – enfleshment: “God with us.” God getting the divine hands dirty, mucking in there with the rest of us in the ordinary and the everyday things of life. God says not “Don’t you worry, I’ll fix everything,” but “We are here, now, together - you and I; we are in this together – I am with you.....all the time. Even now. Especially now.”

How many times have you felt like Jeremiah and said, “No, God, not me. I’m not ready to answer your call right now. I don’t have the time. I don’t have any experience”? Or how about Jeremiah’s or Jonah’s complaint? Have you done that? “Why me, Oh Lord, why is this happening to me? How can you be so unfair?”

How many times have you experienced the sting of pain and fear and disappointment? How many times have you found yourself searching for the right words to say to someone who was hurting? How many times has God called you?

We are all called by God – past, present, future – to a ministry. Our world is filled with pain and need. How will you respond? How will we respond?

It’s tempting to pass the Epistle by, today – that purple passage from Paul! But those words underpin this truth. It follows on his description of life together as the Body of Christ – a vision where Paul almost screams, again and again, to the Corinthians, this vision: “You are not called to be a community gathered around a minister. You are called to be a ministering community.”

We're all called. We're all called to respond – but not haphazardly. We're all called to respond in common, with love. That's what Paul's getting at: “when you respond in all those places God calls you to – when you respond to God's call in every place – it's imperative that you place love at the heart of your response; that I place love at the heart of my response; that we place love at the heart of our response.

In the end, the call to discipleship that Jesus extended to his own disciples was predicated on exactly this, that love underpinned – underpins – everything. That call required of them – and, now, us – to see, learn, and be able to name *and* respond to all the ways God's kingdom is happening among all people, starting where they were, and where we are. It's a call to engage the whole world, not in opposition, but in wonder at the signs of God's love and power at work in our world. Those are our marching orders, this is our call – can you hear it?

So listen for God's voice calling you. May you and I – may we – have the strength to say in response: “Here am I Lord. Send me.”

