

"God Calls Us," Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 13:10 -17; 8/29/2007; Albany UMC

For me, it is never easy to say the words "I have a calling." When people say easily, "God tells me to do this" or "I have been called to do this," I just don't feel comfortable with it. Not that I don't believe God calls them to do what they do. The reason is because those words are too personal and also heavy ones to share with others. It is something you don't just spit out without seriously thinking. You really need to give yourself enough time before you tell other people. Otherwise, what you say may just sound cheap.

But today, we hear from Jeremiah about his calling. And to me, his story never sounds cheap.

Born in a priest family in Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel in the 7th century B.C., Jeremiah also became a prophet. As far as I know, Jeremiah was one of the most strong and courageous preachers in the history of Israel.

We know that Judah fell by the hands of Babylonians in the 6th century BC. The city of Jerusalem collapsed, and lots of people were taken to Babylon as slaves. Well, that was when Jeremiah was the preacher of the nation. Jeremiah was right there delivering God's message to the nation in the middle of the national crisis.

If you read the Old Testament, peace and prosperity in Israel always came from a right relationship between the people and God. And the biblical authors witness that any kind of problem with neighboring super powers has to do with the nation's religious corruption. Simply saying, whenever people turn away from God, they have to pay a price; there is judgment from God on the nation. The book of Jeremiah is no exception!

So Jeremiah's preaching was clear. He calls on people to stop their idolatry. If you read chapter 7, people even burnt their own children to false gods. Can you believe this? We are not talking about killing animals for sacrifices; they killed their own children to please their gods? That gives us an idea of how serious their idolatry situation was at that time.

Of course, God was upset. So in 7:16, God says to Jeremiah, "hey, son, don't pray to me for them." I don't know if there is any other place in the Bible you can see God telling not to pray. This is amazing. And the worse thing is that in 16:2, God tells Jeremiah not to marry and have children because

God's judgment on Judah is coming very soon through the Babylonian conquerors.

But in this entire chaotic situation, Jeremiah was steadfast in what he was doing. His job was let people know what God was telling him.

Some scholars say that Jeremiah was a type of Christ. Just like leaders of the church and crowds accused and tried to kill Jesus, Jeremiah was also rejected by his people. He was beaten and thrown in a basement dungeon. But he was not afraid of speaking up. As Jesus was not afraid to preach in the court of the temple in Jerusalem, Jeremiah was not afraid to talk about the destruction of the temple.

Just as Jesus spoke to a stiff-necked people, Jeremiah preached fiery sermons to the nation. But more importantly,

As Jesus did, Jeremiah preached God's mercy and love toward his people; he made it clear that if they were to turn back to God, God would forgive them, no matter what.

Going back to our text for today, we see here Jeremiah who shares with us a story of his calling. There is no doubt that Jeremiah was a man of God. God really wanted to use him as a servant. It's amazing that God is even saying to him, "I knew you before I made you in your mother's womb. And before you were born, I consecrated you; I set you aside. You are mine. You belong to me; you will do whatever I will tell you to do."

But, it is even more amazing that Jeremiah says "No" to God. Jeremiah's reason for saying 'No' is legitimate, though, because he says he does not know how to speak.

If you want to become a preacher, at least you should know how to speak; and if your speech is not good, they are not going to listen to you. If they don't listen to you, nothing is going to happen! So Jeremiah was right. He would never think he could preach, then he didn't even think about it! That's natural; that's easy! Even kids know!

... I don't know why. A couple of times in the past years, I have asked Samuel, my son, if he would become a preacher in the future. He said "No." The reason is, he said, if you want to become a preacher, you would have to read lots of books. He said that he knew it from what daddy does. And he

said it would be hard for him to do that. Well, the conversation couldn't go any further. I had to stop right there!

But God did not stop for Jeremiah. "Don't say that I am just a kid," God said to Jeremiah. "Because everywhere I send you, you shall go. And whatever I command you, you shall speak. Don't be afraid of anything because I am with you."

Preacher Frederick Buechner has said that the call of God is what you feel most glad about. Yesterday, we had an orientation at the seminary. Out of this group of men and women, there was a person who just finished his MBA degree; there was a woman who works as a lawyer in San Francisco; there was a young man who just graduated from college; and there was a man who is 65 years old. What a mixed group! They came from many different backgrounds, young and old; they told us many different life stories. But there was one thing in common: everyone was happy to be there.

God called Jeremiah even when he never thought he would qualify. But the God who called him not only gave him the power to do the work but also helped him to be happy about what he was doing, even when there was difficulties and hardships in his ministries.

God calls men and women to be workers of his kingdom. You don't have to be ordained ministers. If you are baptized, you are all ministers one way or another.

The world needs us. God wants our answer to his call. When we hear about natural disasters like the earthquake in Peru, we may ask ourselves "What can we do about it?" We get overwhelmed; we feel very much inferior because there is not much we can do for people down there.

But it's the power and love of God that turn even unqualified-inferior-feeling people into effective workers in this world.

We just say "Yes" to the call, not because we are qualified, not because we can do it, but because God can help us do whatever needs to be done.

The world should be better when you and I respond positively to the call of God. And God's affirmation "I will be with you" makes all the difference in the world. Amen.