

Called to Witness

This fall we're exploring the phenomenon of call in our lives. How are we called? To what are we called? By whom are we called? To whom are we called? Why are we called? These questions, and others like them, are being asked as we examine the many dimensions of call.

Through our "Called to Life" classes, through our reading, through our worship, and through our preaching, we're taking a closer look at this that is so central in our lives.

The story of the call of the prophet Jeremiah is the focus of our attention today. And of the many and numerous accounts of call in the Bible it is interesting because it comes to a young boy.

This fact alone has much to teach us about the call from God to serve. In this case, it's clear that God had not been doing a survey of all of the people under his watch to determine who was best qualified to serve as a prophet. God was not secretly auditioning people based on how they speak or how they look or how they interact with others. God was not out there seeking the one with the best leadership skills or record of accomplishment. God was not looking at IQ scores. God was not trying to figure out who was worthy or who deserved this call.

While certainly a young child can begin to demonstrate some of these qualities very early in life, any suggestion that Jeremiah was picked because of them is further quashed by the very first words of God to the young Jeremiah. "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." (Jer.1:5) There was nothing observable in Jeremiah that caused God to call him in particular—nothing observable because there was nobody, no person, to observe. Jeremiah was selected by God before he was even conceived.

Now those who are Presbyterian to their core will find this part of that call of Jeremiah to be very exciting because it points to that much maligned and misunderstood concept of predestination—a badge that at times has been worn with conviction, and at times has been pinned on us with derision. Let me explain.

Presbyterians, historically, have been the ones to emphasize the sovereignty of God to the full extent that God predestines those who are called by God. God's awesomeness, God's all-knowingness, God's omniscience—all aspects of God's sovereignty—in their totality are way beyond our human ability to comprehend in even the most basic way. Predestination is an extension of that or a corollary to it in that God's rationale, if there is one, for who is selected to be called or chosen for salvation is beyond our limited and finite human understanding. This account of the call of Jeremiah is one of the numerous scriptural reference to which adherents of predestination theology point to back up this concept.

By the way, as long as I have brought up this thorny matter of predestination, let me tell you what it is not. Predestination is not the same as predeterminism which is the belief that every action, every event, every decision in our lives is already worked out in advance by God. So it is not predestination that is the reason you're here in this room at this time on this date with these people. It is not predestination that you chose your career or the school or the spouse or any other of the many choices you make. Predestination is not in conflict with free will.

Predestination is what we observe in this call of Jeremiah that was initiated by God long before Jeremiah was even a glint in his own father's eye, as the old saying goes.

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you. . . ." There is something beautiful and something comforting about this declaration by God. It speaks of the love that God has that is deeper and more profound than we can comprehend. And yet it is deeply personal as well. That the God of the cosmos expresses love in this very specific way is comforting—comforting not only to Jeremiah in his recollection

of his call, but comforting to us as well over 2500 years later. That God loves before it all begins and without regard for behaviors of the objects of God's love, good and bad, is grace in its purest form.

While we can find comfort in the confidence that God calls without regard to human condition, we can also find comfort and encouragement in how God responds to the objections Jeremiah raises. For as soon as God has issued this call to the boy Jeremiah, his response is that because he is young and immature he has not had the occasion or opportunity to become a speaker. In other words, Jeremiah has the audacity to tell God that he picked wrongly.

“You must have made a mistake, God, in picking me to be your prophet.”

Now if ever there was evidence that Jeremiah was young and lacking any savvy, it is this response to God. But interestingly, while Jeremiah has the excuse of his youth to excuse his challenge to God, most of the other call stories in the Bible are about the calling coming in adulthood. And nearly all of them also have the audacity to question the wisdom of God's calling.

Of course, God will hear nothing of the objection on the part of Jeremiah and responds not with anger or frustration but with reassurance—reassurance that a mistake has not been made in his being chosen for this important task laid before him.

As we consider and perhaps reconsider the calls that we have received in our lives, it's worth regarding the why-me aspect in light of Jeremiah's call. Do the calls we receive arise out of a track record of achievement? Or do such achievements come as a result of a call that we embraced? It's kind of one of those chicken and egg questions of which came first, the call or the equipping.

This is all closely related to another matter that has been and continues to be a focus of our attention in our Year of Call emphasis—that of spiritual gifts.

We read about spiritual gifts in several places in the New Testament. Spiritual gifts are those abilities, qualities, and characteristics with which we have been imbued and enriched by the Holy Spirit. The affirmation is made in scripture that every person is gifted with at least one spiritual gift if not several gifts. They are gifts pure and simple, meaning that they have not be learned or earned or obtained. They are innate in each of us.

There are a couple of different lists specifying what these spiritual gifts are found in various parts of the New Testament. In our “Called to Life” classes this fall, we're using a list that includes these spiritual gifts. As you hear me share this list, listen for those that resonate with you: administration, discernment, evangelism, encouragement, faith, giving, hospitality, intercession, knowledge, leadership, mercy, pastoring, service, teaching, and wisdom.

Again, each one of us has at least one of the gifts I just named. Sometimes all it takes is to stop long enough to take a close look at yourself to begin to discern and discover that gift, or those gifts, that are a fundamental part of who you are.

It's in this giftedness that we can begin to discover what may be at the heart of God's call to each of us today.

Perhaps some of you who are engaging this Year of Call are doing so in a way that is reaffirming a call that has already been discerned. We have been acknowledging and celebrating these calls as we have been commissioning various groups of workers within our church community. We've commissioned our musicians who live out a very important calling in our midst as they enhance our experience of worship here.

We've commissioned those who are called to serve in spiritual leadership roles in the church.

We've commissioned those who have answered the call to serve as volunteers in our Family Promise ministry with homeless families in our community.

We've commissioned those who have answered the call to the teaching ministry of the church.

We'll continue to celebrate many other callings in the weeks and months ahead.

While many have discerned a calling, the call of Jeremiah can provide insight for us today as we seek to discover and discern our calling in the world today either as we are already living it out or by coming to realize that there is a new or additional calling in my life.

Part of that discernment is to pause and listen. Pause and listen to what God is calling you—calling through the discernment of your spiritual gifts and how you can use them in your daily living.

Another aspect of God's calling Jeremiah at such a young age can be comforting to us no matter our age today. While he did not immediately recognize within himself the ability to carry out God's plans, Jeremiah nevertheless embraces the call with the trust of a child in his or her parent who expresses confidence and assurance. As that call unfolded in Jeremiah's life, it became clear that he was to become one of the most effective and clear voices of God speaking to the people of God. A prophet is one who becomes the mouthpiece of God, and that is what he does as he accepts the call to witness

One of the greatest aspects of God's claim and call is the promise to accompany one in the carrying it out. Jesus, when commissioning his disciples to go and witness to God's love, assures them that they need not fear anyone or anything that may appear to be an obstacle. He reminds them, "Are not two sparrows sold for penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows." (Mt. 10:29-31)

It is that ongoing promise that we are not alone in our being called. We are not alone in our carrying out our call. Whether it be with others similarly called or it be a singular call, we are accompanied by God in the person and presences of Jesus.

I close with an adaptation of St. Patrick's Breastplate by James Quinn.

Christ be beside me; Christ be before me.
Christ be behind me, King of my heart.
Christ be within me, Christ be below me;
Christ be above me, never to part.

Christ on my right hand, Christ on my left hand,
Christ all around me, shield in the strife
Christ in my sleeping, Christ in my sitting,
Christ in my rising, Light of my life.

Christ be In all hearts thinking about me;
Christ be on all tongues telling of me.
Christ be the vision in eyes that see me;
in ears that hear me Christ ever be.