

Not Ready for God  
Jeremiah 1:4-10  
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You never know what's going to happen at Vacation Bible School. A kid may discover God's love in a new way, a minister may eat bugs, and a normal, average, of-no-consequence human being might be called by God.

In the summer of 1997, at First Christian Church in Jeffersonville, Ind., I was walking out of church after a night of leading VBS with our pastor's wife, Laura. I was lamenting the fact that in a few weeks, I would be returning to Ohio University to start coursework for a degree that felt more like an obligation than a passion. Laura looked at me and said, "You should to seminary instead." Huh. Seminary.

Ministry is, as one book describes it, and "odd and wondrous calling." And Crestwood has been blessed to watch people answer that call. A few years ago, it was Kelly Hale, who found a home here and a congregation that would recognize her as a woman with gifts for ministry worthy of ordination. A few weeks ago, it was Steph Wallace, who began her journey as an ordained minister. And today, it's Missy, as we honor the decades of ministry she has already completed and commission her to continue serving the children and families of Crestwood. For each of them, God pointed to them and said, "You. You."

How does such a thing happen? How does the word of the Lord come to people? For me, it was in a church parking lot after Vacation Bible School. For Moses it was through a burning bush. For Jeremiah it was through a divine mandate. For others it might be through a book, a passage of scripture, or even a sermon. I firmly believe if we are listening, with our ears and with our hearts, the word of the Lord will be heard. God is still speaking, and it might be to you.

What I find more interesting than how God speaks to us is what God has to say. I've found that it rarely has anything to do with my own hopes and desires. The word of the Lord that came to me was "seminary." Huh? What? You must be talking to someone else. You mean that place where everyone wears white robes and hovers a few inches off the ground? Surely this call was for someone else, someone more qualified, someone more saintly, someone more...more unlike me.

When I raised my voice of protest, I joined a long line of conscientious objectors to God's call. At the Burning Bush Moses balked, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" The prophet Isaiah cried, "Woe to me!" when God came to him. And in today's reading Jeremiah says, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child." If you've ever disputed God's call, you have taken your place in the pantheon of nay-sayers who respond to God, not with a confident, "Here I am, send me," but with a cowardly, "The party you are trying to reach is not available. Send anyone but me."

Jeremiah's response is especially timid. "I am only." Those may be three of the most damaging words we can say. "I am only." When you think of things you've been asked to do, challenges you've been asked to face, have you said those words? "I am only." No matter what conclusion we add, we are discounting both our own worthiness and God's power and generosity. Saying "I am only" may feel like we are simply recognizing our limitations, but it ignores the fact that God can bridge the gap between who we are and who God is calling us to be. God calls Jeremiah to "uproot and to tear down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to

plant.” You think Jeremiah can do all that himself? Of course not. But he doesn’t have to. He only has to obey God. God says to Jeremiah, “You. You.”

“I am only.” I am only a child. I am only a teenager. I am only a woman. I am only an occasional church-goer. I am only available a few hours a week or a month. I only want to work with children. I am only able to do a little bit. I am only one person. I was talking to someone once about the possibility of her becoming an Elder. She was honored to be asked but said, “I just don’t feel qualified to be an Elder.” And I said, “Then you are a perfect candidate.” Saying “I am only” doesn’t give God credit for being able to work with cracked pots like us.

Too often we let our own self-defined limitations keep us from becoming who God has called us to be. Do you find it a bit ironic that Jeremiah, who tried to excuse himself because he wasn’t a good speaker, is the same guy who gave us a biblical book with 52 chapters? What could we accomplish if instead of defining ourselves by our limitations, we opened ourselves by our potential, to a future determined by a God-us partnership? A young photographer at Winston Churchill’s 80<sup>th</sup> birthday party approached the man and said, “Sir, I hope I have the honor of taking your picture on your 100<sup>th</sup> birthday.” And Churchill said, “I don’t see why not. You look fit enough.” If we live our lives talking about only the things we cannot do, we will miss out on the things we can do through God’s empowering grace. There are all kinds of things that we can’t do. But there’s so much more that we can do if we let ourselves believe it.

As I think about Jeremiah’s call and response, I think I’m most struck, not by how God called him or what God said, but who God approached in the first place. Jeremiah was probably around 18 years old at the time of his call. I’ve known a lot of great 18-year-olds in my work with youth, but I’m not sure any of them were equipped to be called as a prophet to the nations. Did God dial the right number here? He wants Jeremiah?

And yet, if you look at God’s track record, you’ll see that God has a penchant for selecting those whom society would consider benchwarmers. If you think of the call of Moses, or Jacob, or Mary, or the 12 disciples, you might conclude that being totally inept, immoral, cowardly, and dim-witted are the only qualities God looks for when calling potential leaders. The flaw in thinking here may be trying to define worthiness through human stereotypes. God doesn’t seem to be limited at all by the categories we think are important: age, race, gender identity, education level, physical ability, economic status. God is an equal-opportunity life-changer and anyone with the breath of life in them is fair game for God’s work. “You. You.”

I believe when God calls someone like Mary or Jeremiah or you or me, it says less about us and more about God. God’s not calling us because we’re uniquely qualified or gifted. Was the deceitful Jacob qualified to bear the divine blessing? Was the unwed teenage Mary qualified to be a God-bearer in this world? The call comes not because of our personal attributes or because of any alleged virtues we possess, but solely out of the gracious goodness of God. And I believe God calls us, not because of our talent, but because of our willingness.

And we have to be willing, because what God is calling us to do is not exactly a tropical vacation. Being willing to live out the call of our faith can mean speaking the truth when it would just be easier to stay quiet or standing up when it would be saner to just stay seated. And yet, as the Lord tells Jeremiah in the Bible translation *The Message*, “I’ll be right there, looking after you.” Or as we will sing in just a few minutes, God says, “I’ll be there, as I have always been.”

No matter where we are called to be, no matter what we are called to do, no matter how large a leap of faith we are called to take, God is there. Maybe we are called to leap across the threshold of a seminary doorway. Or maybe we are called to leap into a conversation at work

where injustice is being perpetrated. Or maybe we are called to leap from pew-sitter to prime-time church participant. Wherever we are called to go, God is there, just as God has always been.

“Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you,” God says to Jeremiah. After I told my mom about this strange thing I was considered, going to seminary and becoming a minister, she told me a story she had never, ever told me before. She said when I was born, when the nurse handed me to her for the first time, my mom heard a voice say, “My little preacher man.” Now, that could have just been the drugs talking, or maybe the beeping machines in the hospital room caused Mom to hear things, but I tend to believe there may have been something else at work. “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Before you were born I set you apart.”

God has set each of us apart. Sometimes that call comes very early on in life, maybe even before we were born. And sometimes the call comes as late as Abraham and Sarah, who became first-time parents at the youthful age of about 90. What if Abraham had said, “I am only an elderly nomad”? Or if Sarah had said, “I am only a barren old lady”? What if anyone who has ever accomplished anything in God’s name turned down God’s call with, “I am only”?

I want to share with you this quote from Barbara Brown Taylor, one of my favorite preachers and writers. In her book, “A Preaching Life,” Taylor says this: “If my own experience can be trusted, then God does not call us once but many times. There are calls to faith and calls to ordination, but in between there are calls to particular communities and calls to particular tasks within them – calls into and out of relationships as well as calls to seek God wherever God may be found. Sometimes those calls ring clear as bells and sometimes they are barely audible, but in any case we are not meant to hear them all by ourselves. It was part of God’s genius to incorporate us as one body, so that our ears have other ears, other eyes, minds, hearts and voices to help us interpret what we’ve heard. Together we can hear our calls, and together we can answer them, if only we will listen for the still, small voice that continues to speak to us through the language of our lives.”

“You should consider seminary instead.” God could have chosen to work solo, but for reasons we can’t understand God chose to partner with us in God’s work in this world. I wonder God believes in us more than we believe in ourselves “I am only.” God is calling people to uproot the weeds of injustice and to tear down the walls of division, to destroy the human-made prejudices and overthrow the systems of unequal power, to build the homes that welcome everyone and plant the seeds of inclusive grace and love. And do you know who God is calling to do that? Can you guess? “You. You.” You are only child of God. And that’s all God needs to change the world.