

“Called and Being Called”
St. Paul’s UCC Church
January 30, 2022

Friends in Christ....

I believe that God calls each one of us to do a task or more likely multiple tasks. We are all called to love one another. Other tasks include getting into ministry whether as a clergy person or a mission worker. We are called to be the best husband, wife, parent, child, friend, neighbor, employee, boss, etc. Some calls are very direct touching a person’s most inner being with a sense that the person should respond in a positive manner. Sometimes the person drags their feet and says that is not for me. But God is persistent.

Have you ever thought about how often people end up in a line of work that they had never considered? One that never in their wildest dreams thought they would do. Yet when it happened, the person realized that God had been preparing them for some time. Most of the time, we look at our lives in retrospect and can see how that invisible hand was there. Yes, it is true that there are “Ah-Ha” moments when dramatically we sense the hand of God. But for the most part, God is working quietly behind the scenes and unrecognized at that time as being the work of God. Only in looking back can we see how God was preparing us for a call.

Our Old Testament and Gospel texts today are about calls. Jeremiah is called by God to be a prophet to Jerusalem and Judah. Jesus is called by God to bring His Kingdom here on earth.

I don’t know about you, but when I hear the name of Jeremiah, I think of the Three Dog’s Night song, Jeremiah was a Bullfrog. But the Old Testament prophet was not a bullfrog. He was called at a young age to speak God’s word to the rulers and the people. It is no wonder that he was reluctant as the message was doom and gloom. But, God does not take no as the final answer. Hear now the calling of Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 1:4-10 (CEB)

Call of Jeremiah

⁴The LORD’s word came to me:

- ⁵“Before I created you in the womb I knew you;
before you were born I set you apart;
I made you a prophet to the nations.”
- ⁶“Ah, LORD God,” I said, “I do not know how to speak
because I am only a child.”
- ⁷The LORD responded,
“Do not say, ‘I am only a child.’
Where I send you, you must go;
what I tell you, you must say.
- ⁸Do not be afraid of them,
because I am with you to rescue you,”
declares the LORD.
- ⁹Then the LORD stretched out his hand,
touched my mouth, and said to me,
“I am putting my words in your mouth.
- ¹⁰This very day I appoint you over nations and empires,
to dig up and pull down,
to destroy and demolish,
to build and plant.”

Rev. Rolf Morck writes: “Sometimes it is the smallest or most common of words in a passage of scripture that catches our attention so that we hear it brand new. For example, in verse 8, the Lord instructs Jeremiah, “Do not be afraid of them....” “Who is them?” “Them” are the people who are going to be on the receiving end of Jeremiah's preaching. We often read scripture as if we are innocent or neutral observers. But “them” is also us. Now what? The good news is that God is not afraid of telling us what we need to hear. The word of the Lord points out the fallacy of our self-righteousness or assumption that we can save ourselves. The word of the Lord brings us to repentance and humility before a God who loves us with a love that is not afraid to change us. Jeremiah brings a word of the Lord that is not afraid to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant. And for us that is good news.”

The context of Jeremiah's call gives us an initial point of contact with our day. The opening three verses of Jeremiah 1, which was not read, tells us that Jeremiah was called to preach during a very difficult time in Israel's history. He ministered during the last tumultuous days of Judah's slide into captivity—from the days of good King Josiah who tried to reform an apostate nation, through the short miserable reigns of Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim and Jehoiachin, and to the end of the nation under Zedekiah, when “the people of Jerusalem went into exile.” For 40 years he spoke the Word of the Lord to the powers and the people who were headed to national and personal disaster, but they did not know it.

A ministry like that must be deeply rooted in God's word. We cannot take on the powers that be and an apostate nation unless we are sure that we are speaking God's own word, rather than our own personal opinion. Jeremiah and Jesus were sure. Jeremiah was not making a career choice when he undertook this ministry of hard words. No, he says, “the Word of the Lord came to me.” Throughout his ministry, Jeremiah was opposed by false prophets who spoke their own words of comfort and cheer to a nation that needed a hard Word from God.

To go against the grain as Jeremiah and Jesus did, we will need a deep conviction that our ministry is of God. Note how God drove that message home throughout our text. Did you notice all the “I's” spoken by God? “I formed you, I set you apart, I appointed you, I send you, I command you, I am with you and will rescue you, I have put my words, I appoint you over nations.” From beginning to the catastrophic end, the ministry of Jeremiah and Jesus were from God. That is an important word when our best and faithful work seems to bear no fruit. Success in worldly terms is not necessarily what God calls us to.

Not only did Jeremiah know that God had called him to this ministry; he also knew that God had given him the specific words to speak. When he protested that he was not up to being God's mouthpiece (“I do not know how to speak; I am only a child”), God not only promised him protection and rescue, but also gave him the very words to speak. “Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth, and said to me, ‘Now I have put my words in your mouth.’” Unless we are sure that we are similarly called by God and are speaking the very Word of God, we will not be able to preach the message of Jeremiah or of Jesus. We will choose

the smooth and easy words of false prophets with their bright smiles, their immaculately coiffed hair and their unfailingly positive messages.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus begins his ministry in the fourth chapter at his home town of Nazareth which was an agricultural village that sat on a major trade route and was close to the Galilean capital Sephoris. A well-known member of this small village (population, archeologists estimate, around 150), who was a craftsman; returns with a reputation for healing and acting like an old-time prophet. He shows up at the synagogue, opens the scroll of Isaiah to the place we call chapter 61, reads the first-person statement of a prophetic figure claiming to be anointed and sent by the Lord for a work of liberation and healing, and boldly applies that passage to himself. Now hear how he was received:

Gospel: Luke 4:21-30 (CEB)

²¹ He began to explain to them, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it."

²² Everyone was raving about Jesus, so impressed were they by the gracious words flowing from his lips. They said, "This is Joseph's son, isn't it?"

²³ Then Jesus said to them, "Undoubtedly, you will quote this saying to me: 'Doctor, heal yourself. Do here in your hometown what we have heard you did in Capernaum.'" ²⁴ He said, "I assure you that no prophet is welcome in the prophet's hometown. ²⁵ And I can assure you that there were many widows in Israel during Elijah's time, when it did not rain for three and a half years and there was a great food shortage in the land. ²⁶ Yet Elijah was sent to none of them but only to a widow in the city of Zarephath in the region of Sidon. ²⁷ There were also many persons with skin diseases in Israel during the time of the prophet Elisha, but none of them were cleansed. Instead, Naaman the Syrian was cleansed."

²⁸ When they heard this, everyone in the synagogue was filled with anger. ²⁹ They rose up and ran him out of town. They led him to the crest of the hill on which their town had been built so that they could throw him off the cliff. ³⁰ But he passed through the crowd and went on his way.

May God bless our hearing of His Holy Word? Amen.

In the verses ahead of today's text Luke writes that Jesus called himself the Messiah. Today is the rest of the story, so to speak, and it doesn't end well. But before we get to the "cliff-hanger," there are a few details about Jesus' words that are important to note, particularly for overall themes in Luke's Gospel. Working our way backwards, that Jesus references the widow at Zarephath and the leper Naaman, the Syrian, reveals for whom Jesus has come — the widows, the lepers, the outsiders. Jesus' whole ministry will be for the least of these, over and over again. Moreover, Jesus is for *everyone*. Both Elijah and Elisha take God into places where God was not thought to be and had no business being. It is these words of inclusion, Jesus' own interpretation of his ministry, the real reason for God in a manger, that elicit a very quick transition from awe to rage for the hearers of Jesus' words. So why is that?

The description of Jesus as prophet, along with Jesus' reference to past prophets in Israel's history, is a primary category through which Luke presents Jesus. Jesus is a righteous and innocent prophet as will be made clear by Luke's account of the centurion's words at the death of Jesus — "surely, this man was innocent" (Luke 23:47). Remembering the role of the Old Testament prophets is important for this passage. Prophecy is not about predicting the future, unless it means saying that the future is secure in God.

Rather, prophets tell the truth about the present and give hope to God's presence. Jesus' sermon in Nazareth is a prophetic message. Jesus tells the truth about the realities of our world, where the lowly are looked down upon, where the poor sleep in cardboard boxes under freeways, where the captives remain in their prisons, where the rich live exceedingly full lives. But reading — or hearing — between the lines, Jesus' announces that God's favor is upon us, upon all, imperceptibly here and now.

We are rightly suspicious of self-appointed prophets. Biblical warrant for this suspicion lies in the fact that the typical prophet in Scripture is profoundly reluctant to accept the appointment. Whence the sarcastic label "self-anointed prophet" applied to anyone who too readily claims such a role. In most biblical contexts, the term prophet means "forth-teller" rather than "foreteller." That is, the designated person is asked to speak to the community in the name of God. Sometimes, indeed, the message does include reference to the future, but mainly it

is a message the community needs to hear regarding how it ought to alter its way of proceeding in the present.

Beware of false prophets.

Remember that you are called to be a child of God. Live in His love.

Thanks be to God. Amen.