

Calling all Prophets

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Before I formed you in the womb

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Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, '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.' Then I said, 'Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.' But the Lord said to me, 'Do not say, "I am only a boy"; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. ⁸Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.' Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, 'Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.'

Jeremiah 1:4-10, NRSV

This is our last week with the prophets, at least from this pulpit. And today, in our reading from the Book of Jeremiah, we heard a classic part that marks all prophetic literature in the Bible, “the prophetic call.” Every prophet receives a call from God. In Isaiah, at the beginning of chapter 6 the soon-to-be-called prophet sees God sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and he hears God’s voice ask “whom shall I send?” And Isaiah answers, “Here I am, send me.” The call is one of the most fundamental marks of all prophetic narratives. And, I think, it is the part of the prophetic tradition that each and every one of us can readily relate to. For we are all called to do God’s work in some way, and I would even argue that we are all called in a prophetic way. But “the call” is the one place in our ancient scripture where we can identify with hope rather than with despair. This morning’s reading from the HB, is God’ call to the prophet Jeremiah.

Because Jeremiah’s call happens at the very beginning of the Book, it is unique in the HB. Chapter 1, verse 4: *Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, '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.'* There is no question, God is calling Jeremiah. I knew you. I consecrated you. I appointed you....says the Lord. Sounds like a call to me.

And, in the prophetic tradition in the HB, once a prophet has been called by God, there is also a pretty standard prophetic response: *You talkin' to me? No, no no. You can't be talkin' to me. I'm not worthy. I am sooo not prophet material.* And that denial is usually followed by a lengthy listing of some of the so-called-prophet’s most glaring self-defined shortcomings. And Jeremiah is no exception – he is shocked: “Ah look Lord, I, I, I don’t know what to say, I’m so not good at public speaking, I’m young, inexperienced, I wouldn’t know where to begin.” But God responds, as is the

usual course, by telling Jeremiah that he need not worry, because.....well, just because. Because he has been chosen by God, and he speaks for God, and God will be with him, and God will protect him. And...that's all there is to it.

And that is both the good news and the bad news about a true calling – prophetic or otherwise. A true calling is a *divine commission*. That is to say, it is not necessarily of our own choosing. Jeremiah was not unhappy in his job. He was not looking for something more fulfilling. He had no particular desire to enter the exciting field of prophetic ministry, as it were. He was, in fact, minding his own business when God reached out and tapped him on the shoulder...actually, touched his mouth, and said “Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms.” *Now*, Jeremiah has a choice. I want to make a clear distinction here. What we ultimately *do* is of our own choosing, but what we are *called to do* is not. That’s what distinguishes a call from a wish.

In his classic book, *The Prophets*, Abraham Heschel writes that the prophets - Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel - essentially address the human “failure of freedom.” Their central prophetic message to us, says Heschel, is an, “insistence that *the human situation can be understood only in conjunction with the divine situation...*” That is, human beings have, “choice, but not sovereignty.”¹ That basically means that we have the freedom to choose between options, but not the sovereignty to control the options from which we can choose. Whether or not we *follow* God’s call is up to us. But we do not have the sovereignty to change the call. We pick up or hang up, but we cannot dial another number.

The second thing about a true calling is that it comes when we are ready, not when we are looking. Not when we are wanting to be called, but when we are ready to be called. And unfortunately, sometimes, willing and able are in two different time zones. Jeremiah tells God that he cannot be a prophet because he is “just a boy.” And God snaps back: “Do not say that you are just a boy, for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you.” Sort of the divine version of, “because I said so.” And again, Jeremiah has the freedom to act, but not the freedom to change the calling or its timing.

There is an old Hindu story about the divine couple, Siva and Shakti. They are hanging out in their heavenly penthouse watching the humming of the human world. And they are saddened and dismayed by the suffering of the human condition. The hardship, the struggle, the misery of human life weighs heavily on their hearts. And as Shakti watches a poor old man shuffling down

¹ Heschel, 190.

the road in rags, his sandals worn through to the toe, her heart breaks. She is touched by his innocence and his indigence. And she asks her husband Savi to send down a bag of gold for this poor wretch. And after watching the man for a awhile, Savi says “no, I can’t do that.” And Shakti says, “what do you mean you can’t do that? You are the Lord of the Universe. You can do anything you want to do!” Savi says, “you are right, my sweet, but he is not ready to receive it.” Shakti is angered by her husband’s callous arrogance. “Oh please,” she says, “can’t you just drop a bag of gold in his path? Common.” Savi says, “of course I can, but that is a very different thing.” And so Savi drops a large bag filled with gold nuggets in the path ahead of the pauper.

Meanwhile, the man walks slowly and deliberately along the path, wishing that he had a few coins to get a bite of food. Worrying about how he might find someplace to lay his head that night, and dreaming of the riches that would provide him with a sweet feather bed in a warm dry palace like the ones just outside of his village. And all of a sudden he spies a large object in the middle of his path. “Aha,” he shouts, “look there, a large rock right in the middle of the road.” And as he makes a wide detour around the big bag of gold he says to himself, “What a lucky thing that I have seen that rock, or I might have torn my sandals even further.”

Gifts and callings come when we are ready, not when we are dreaming.

Third, it seems to me that God never calls anyone *into* their comfort zone. Every prophet, every agent of God’s deepest will, has, at one time or another, been frightened to their core. That is not to say that we should not follow our bliss, as it were, but that if that bliss is authentic, the road ahead will be fraught with pain and pitfalls. God never calls us into our comfort zone. Noah, Moses, Abraham, Sarah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, Jesus, Paul.....All sucked summarily out of their comfort zones. So fasten your seatbelts.

And last, in the final analysis, God is calling us to wholeness above all else. God calls us just as we are, just as we were created to be called. God calls us to be reconciled with all that we are, the good the bad the ugly and the magnificent. Any calling that denies our whole selves is not God’s calling. **Any calling that seeks for us to be good rather than whole is a trap.** This is what the wise writer Parker Palmer means when he says that dwelling with God is being faithful to one’s nature.

Frederick Beuchner says you know when you have met your calling when your deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger.² – That is, the work that you most need to do, fits with what the world most needs to have done...Or put another way, what God most needs you to do for God's world.

A friend was telling me the story of a Rabbi who was once asked, Oy, with all the studying you have to do, and all the controversy surrounding your faith, and with so many people always looking to you for answers and dragging you into their petty problems, and having to work on the weekends why would you ever want to be a Rabbi? And he would always answer with the same enthusiasm, practically bouncing out of his shoes: "Who wouldn't want to be a Rabbi?!!!!!"

May we each and all have this response to our own callings.

Amen.

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² Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Harper & Row Publishers, 1973. Pp. 95.