

## “One at a Time”

A Sermon Based on Jeremiah 1:4-10 and Luke 4:21-30  
Delivered at First Presbyterian Church, Urbana  
on Sunday, February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019  
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Have you ever found yourself thinking about your life, only to say suddenly, “How in the world did I end up here?” Many, maybe even all, of God’s faithful saints must have asked themselves this question. For God works in mysterious ways, we say, and we often see the evidence of that in our lives.

At an Indian mission South Dakota, there are banners hanging up all over the place which say, “The sign of God’s presence with you is that your feet are where you did not expect them to be.” That sounds about right to me.

I cannot explain precisely the manner in which God called me. There was no audible voice, calling, “David, son of David...” I did not see a vision in a dream. What I remember is thinking often of ministry. When I was in church, I would think of myself standing behind the pulpit, preaching and teaching. I knew what an impact preaching and teaching had had upon me. It was wonderful. God’s Word filled me and moved me and was like heat trapped in my bones. I remember feeling compelled to speak.

And then I did. I was invited to preach my first sermon when I was a freshman in college. And that sermon was simply dreadful. I knew nothing about preaching, or how to prepare a sermon. I look back in my mind on those poor faces in church that day and I wonder. I wonder at their patience and their grace. For they all said, as they left church that day, “That was a good sermon...I liked your sermon.” But I knew better, even then.

Later that afternoon, I wondered if I really should pursue the ministry by answering God’s call. Having actually stood behind the pulpit to preach, I was not nearly so eager to do it again. But I found God’s calling irresistible. And I did try to resist! Like Jeremiah, I found God was stronger than my resistance.

And so, here I am. I still wonder sometimes how I came to be where I am. I also know that God has been with me because my feet are not where I expected them to be.

When God called Jeremiah, he, too, was not so eager to stand before the people and preach. He said something like, "Good Lord, I'm only a boy. I can't speak." He was one among many who hesitated and stalled and resisted.

Moses made excuses when God called, so much so that God finally became angry with him. Isaiah hesitated and said that he was unclean like everyone else. Ezekiel required quite a bit of persuasion. It has been so with many who yielded their lives to enter ministry. Most, who hear God's call, have some sense of the responsibilities involved, and of the possibilities for rejection and hardship.

It seems Jeremiah must have been a private, thoughtful person, for whom standing before the people had little appeal. But God had known Jeremiah, from his very beginning. God knew what Jeremiah could do. Indeed, God had created Jeremiah to be a prophet, to be that which God was now calling him to be. Jeremiah was born to be a prophet.

## II

We can understand that, I think, how it seems a person was born to do a particular thing. We have all known someone who was so connected with their vocation, with their work, that we cannot imagine that person doing something else. Can you imagine Mozart not writing music? Can you imagine Einstein not unlocking the riddles of creation? Can you imagine Frank Lloyd Wright not designing? Such people would not be fully who they are without doing what they were born, or created to do. In their vocation is their freedom, their joy, their wholeness.

God created Jeremiah for a particular vocation. And in the call, God began to make Jeremiah aware of it. True, Jeremiah was a young man, probably 18 or 19, when God began to move him deeply. But age does not seem to matter so much to God.

I was young when God began to make me aware of my calling. Mary, the mother of God, was very young, a teenager. God also calls the not so young. Moses was pushing 80 when God moved him. So was Abraham when God called him to leave Padan-aram.

Neither age nor sophistication makes much difference to God. Amos was a simple farmer and a shepherd. The disciples? They were fishermen, tax collectors, radicals.

These are the kinds of people God calls for high purposes: the weak and the foolish, the low and the despised, the very young and the very old. It is as Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth, “Consider, brothers and sisters, how you were called; not many of you are wise by human standards, not many influential, not many from noble families. No, God chose those who by human standards are weak to shame the strong...”

This is an amazing reality, that God has a habit of using folks just like you and me to change the world. Even more amazing is God’s patience in calling us, a patience deeply rooted in God’s steadfast love. God answers every excuse, every self-serving attempt to exempt ourselves from service.

Many of our excuses are self-serving, aren’t they? It seems easier to stand on the sidelines, to not get involved, or have our routines interrupted. It’s so much safer to not put ourselves out in the open, exposing ourselves as the weaklings or novices we really are. At times, we go so far as to give up the greatest joys, being involved in the most exciting endeavors, all for the sake of our comfortable, safe, boring routines.

Well, we know what a poor trade that is. And so does God. God knows all of us exactly as God knew Jeremiah, and God answers each and every one of our excuses for one simple reason: God has a purpose. We human beings, created by God, are here to serve that purpose.

What is that purpose? God’s purpose in creation is abundant life, new life, redemption. We are here to see that life abounds, just as a gardener seeks to nurture a fruitful garden. It is a mighty purpose, a wonderful vision.

Understanding that, it only makes sense that God strives earnestly, continually to turn us around, to awaken us to the purpose for which we were created. God turns us around one person at a time, like Jeremiah.

Rosalie Edge was fond of reminding folks to never doubt that a small group of committed individuals can change the world, for it is only such groups that ever have changed the world.

### III

God calls us one person at a time. God uses particular people, like Jeremiah, to prophecy, to preach and to teach, to act by God's leading, to act as they were born to act. That is how Jeremiah understood himself. He believed that he was a mouthpiece for God, a messenger, who reported what he sensed God say.

As people of faith who have been called by God, we are messengers, evangelists, bearers of the Good News, who say what we have heard declared in the Gospel. The promise is that when God calls us, God provides all that is necessary to fulfill the call. God provides an infusion of the Spirit which energizes us, inspires us and directs us. And the objects of our calls are justice and compassion.

That is what Luke tells us in our Gospel lesson for today. In Luke 4, Luke announces who Jesus is, of what his ministry will consist, and what the Church is to be about. He also shows us what the responses will be to Jesus. The passage Jesus reads is from Isaiah.

In declaring the fulfillment of this passage, Jesus declares that he is God's servant, who will bring to reality the longing and the hope of those who never have what they need, of those who are ever suffering unjustly, and of those who have been made prisoners by a society which knows only human standards. Indeed, all of creation will know the liberation and the amnesty and restoration which he brings, all of which are promised in the year of Jubilee.

Jesus proclaims the fulfillment to his hometown folks, and initially, he is well received. The Holy Spirit begins to stir among the congregation. But suddenly, human standards reassert themselves.

"Is this not Joseph's son?" The question begins to float among the people. "Wait a minute. We know who you are. Who are you to speak in such a grand

way?” Perhaps some whispered to others, “You know, I remember that he was born less than nine months after his mother and father were married.”

“Oh, that’s right. Hmph. So where does he get off talking like this?”

Jesus must have been disappointed, but I doubt he was surprised. Knowing them, he tells them what they will say to him. “Doctor, cure yourself.” Others will say, “Clean up your own house before you come telling us how we ought to live our lives.” They’re trying to put Jesus back in his place, motivated by their blind familiarity. But he won’t let them.

Then another complaint surfaces. The folks know that Jesus has been to Capernaum, a place known to be cosmopolitan, having as many Jews, or believers, as unbelievers. And Jesus went there *before* speaking in his hometown. He dared take the words of God, the good things of God, and share them among people who were not God’s people. That just would not do.

In responding to this, Jesus lifts up their own scriptures. He reminds them of Elijah and Elisha and how they ministered to people who were outsiders. And I don’t think he did this as some form of one-upmanship. Jesus was trying to help them understand, by relying on the history with which they were all familiar.

Well, that’s when they boil over in a rage. For learning what you already should know is a terribly painful thing. They were shamed. And in their shame, they fall back on their last defense: anger and violence.

How often it is that we fall back on anger and violence. How quickly the mood of the congregation changed. And how ironic was their angry reaction, for they were threatening Jesus with death for telling them what they already knew to be the truth. They knew what Jonah had said to God outside Nineveh: “I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” And they knew that God’s steadfast love must even be shown to those who are thought to be outsiders. They knew it, but they wanted to ignore it.

#### IV

Each one of us who is a follower of Jesus has been known by God, claimed by God and called by God, one at a time. We have been called to demonstrate justice and compassion, to live abundantly and enhance life where

ever we are. Each one us, too, has hesitated and made excuses on occasion. For we know well enough that answering God's call exposes us to risks of many kinds: danger, rejection and hardship. There are aspects of our calling we would like to ignore.

What we do well to remember is that there are many more blessings than liabilities and risks. Having called us, God will not fail to provide all we need. God created us to be disciples, just as God created Mozart to write music. Can you imagine yourself doing anything else?

God created us. God calls us. God provides all that we need to answer that calling and fulfill our purpose. And every now and then, God gives us a glimpse of how God has been present with us, when we suddenly realize how our feet are not at all where we expected them to be. For this amazing grace, Thanks be to God. Amen.