

## On the Matter of Callings

A sermon by John Strommen on Jeremiah 1:1-4, 7:1-11      November 25, 2018

In Jeremiah 1, we learn that Jeremiah was called by God personally. The Lord said to Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you and consecrated you. I appointed you to be a prophet to the nations.”

So, you may not be a prophet, whoever you are, but is it possible God also addresses you in this life? If so, what do you think God says to you? “\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, before you were born, I knew you and consecrated you. I appointed you to be...what?”

Jeremiah of course objected, because he was just a kid. “But God, I don’t know what to say or how to speak. I’m only a boy.”

And God says, “Don’t say, ‘I’m only a boy!’” In other words, “I don’t want to hear your excuses, for you will go to whom I send you and speak whatever I command you.” Does God sound a bit harsh here? Maybe. But then the Lord says, “Don’t be afraid, Jeremiah, for I am with you and will take care of you.” Then God put out his hand and touched Jeremiah’s mouth and said to Jeremiah, “Now I have put my words in your mouth. Today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms.” Again, wow! This is so personal – God reaching out and touching Jeremiah’s mouth like that.

What excuses do we bring when God calls us? “I don’t know enough, I can’t teach my kids about faith.” “I don’t have a strong enough faith, I can’t be on the visitation team.” “I don’t have enough time, I can’t serve God now.” I’m too old. I’ve done my time.” “I’m just a regular person, not a pastor. I’m not called like Jeremiah.”

Jeremiah’s objections notwithstanding, years later Jeremiah stood outside the temple as people went to church and preached a sermon to them before they even get into the building.

How would you like it if I started preaching to you before you even got in here and got settled into your your pew? Except it wouldn’t be me, but one of you. Ralph, Tim, Lory, or Oliver or Zoe would be preaching.

What did Jeremiah say that day? Well, it was just read to us. Jeremiah speaks God’s words – just as God said when he called Jeremiah – and those words are a warning. But Jeremiah’s sermon is also reminder to all those folks and us, too, that oh yes, they – and we - do indeed have a calling, and it’s every bit as personal as Jeremiah’s calling. Jeremiah’s calling is to *speak God’s word* and hold people accountable – especially leaders. The people’s callings – the ones who came to worship that day – was to *live the word* in their lives and in their world on Monday and Tuesday. And by the way, this is personal for God.

The sermon from Jeremiah is similar to Micah’s two weeks ago. God calls out the Israelites who are diligent in their worship, but forget about God on Monday and Tuesday and turn their backs on their neighbors. Most significantly, the Israelites were turning their backs on the people at the margins – widows, orphans, immigrants. In many ways, God says, “a worship service only begins here at the temple or sanctuary. Then it continues out to the world that God loves, where all God’s children have worth; where God is God even on Monday. That, too, is the meaning of the worship service in our Lutheran heritage, the service of the people to God and neighbor and it’s around the clock! And if we think God is only concerned with what goes on in a sanctuary and treat worship as merely a refuge from

the world, and if we become complacent in our daily faith life and neglectful of our neighbor, then God will become harder and harder to find. In fact, God will no longer be dwelling here. Yes, it's personal for God. God will be looking for people who understand that God loves the world and has a mission in the world and we are the very ones God has chosen to carry it out.

Now, sometimes passages like this can be overwhelming when we seem to be charged simultaneously with alleviating world hunger, finding shelter for widows and orphans, welcoming immigrants into our homes, and loving all our neighbors, family and friends at once. We are not God; we have limits. Indeed this is true, but we forget this all the time, that we have limits. Either we try to do too much and burn out or we don't try to do too much and feel guilty about it. Or we're not sure what we should be doing and we do whatever comes up, leaving it to chance.

The great theologian St Augustine once defined sin as the failure to order the good. His reasoning goes like this: since we are finite creatures, we can only do a finite number of things, so we must choose the most important things, namely, what God would have us do. That means sin isn't always doing *bad things*, but is often doing *good things* improperly ordered. In other words, if we try to do everything or too much, we fail to prioritize and end up dissipating our life like steam into the air. Then we not only lack focus, but more importantly, we fail to do the things God wants us to do. We fail to do the things God calls us to do. And now we are back to Jeremiah and the subject of callings.

I recently had a conversation with a member who urged me to stop using the word "callings," because I was told, "you're a pastor and you have a calling. But me and everyone else in this church? We don't have callings." I get it. I really do. My calling is explicitly religious and most people don't view their everyday lives as such. And then we look at callings in the Bible, like Jeremiah's, and we think, "This is extraordinary, but I live in ordinary time and space."

My response is, in God's world, every space every day is sacred. In God's world, ordinary time is God's time! God called Jeremiah, God has called me to be a pastor, and God calls each of us. And my calling, in the eyes of God is no more important than yours. Even in Jeremiah's time, God called his people to do justice, love kindness, care for the immigrants, etc. For us today, after God has given to us God's son and the Holy Spirit, even more so. For God, this is personal. God is right there with us and calls each of us to do certain things, but not *every* thing; to be a certain kind of person in the world, not all things to all people. And make no mistake about it, these are callings, just like Jeremiah, but different.

For the remainder of this sermon, I want to take up the question of how we can hear what God's callings are to us. This is a lifelong quest and will always be filled with searching and some uncertainty. And yet, God actually wants to communicate to us what God wants us to do, no matter our age or stage in life. This, of course, is the topic of discernment. How do we discern God's will for our lives so when God says, "Hey, Tim! Listen up," we might actually listen.

There are multiple touchpoints for discerning. Here are five and I recommend doing them with others whenever possible:

1. **Learn your gifts.** If someone said to you, "I'm going to equip you for a certain task, but not tell you the task," you might be able to guess pretty quickly, based on how you were equipped, right? If I gave you a pair of binoculars, a book about native Minnesota birds, and a map of bird habitats in Minnesota, what might you guess the task was?

As a person, how has God equipped you? Understanding this will help narrow your options. This is the work we've been doing in GPS. It's about self-knowledge and God knowledge: how God has gifted you, from natural abilities to spiritual gifts to passions to personality, these are all gifts that give you a certain shape. It means you are equipped for certain things and not others. This is one way God calls you, by learning about yourself.

2. **Explore God's story** in the Bible, preferably with others. If I am to learn what God might be calling me to do, it will help a lot if I can understand more about God's story and what sorts of things God does in the world. One of my religion professors wrote a book about the Bible, entitled "The Book of the Acts of God." The Bible tells us what God did and does. What we do will fit in there somehow. Doing this with others means we get other's insights, not just our own.
3. **Develop a prayer life.** This could be when you're having devotions or any time. It means learning to not only talk to God but listen. Learn to sit in silence while the churned-up waters in your soul settle. When you pray, include things you're thankful for, confess things you feel guilty about, pray for people you love who need God's love, pray for the world, ask for what you need.
4. **Pay attention to your places**, where you live your life and the roles you play for the people closest to you. One of my professors in seminary had a great point I've always remembered: "I've got many students and they have many teachers, but I'm the only daddy my daughter has." Do you think that is a calling? Yes, and of the highest order!
5. **Where do you see God?** Pay attention to your everyday experiences and try to guess about where God shows up. Maybe talk about it with others who are also searching for answers like this. But be warned, you look at life differently then, that's for sure. Even when you're a kid. My mom used to tell my brother Tim that Jesus was always with him, even when he was down stairs riding his trike around the basement. When she called Tim to come up and have lunch one day, Tim didn't want to. Why? "Because if Jesus is down there with me, when I come up for lunch, he might take my trike."

Like I said, life gets reimagined.

So, as you leave here today, leave with this question: what callings does God call me to – today and tomorrow? Amen.