

January 31, 2010: BAD CALL

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:21-30; Psalm 71:1-6

Springwater Presbyterian Church -- Eileen Parfrey

Last week I was in Chicago, a world away from beautiful rural Estacada, and I'm not just talking geography. What I left behind was the congregation's annual meeting, while the Chicago experience was all about the socialization of toddlers. Socialization in my grandson's crowd is less nuanced than "plays well with others." It is closer to, "You don't always get to do what you want." Maybe I'm reading too much into it, but I don't think this reality only applies to toddlers. My reading lately has been about our changing cultural context and "how to be the church" in it, so maybe that's where I get the parallel to toddler socialization. At the heart of "You don't always get to do what you want" is the notion that there is, in fact, a "good" greater than us, which turns out to be good news. Both Jeremiah and Jesus today face the implication of that news for their lives—that there is something greater than they themselves—and that implication shapes and gives meaning to their lives. The implication is God's claim on their lives.

Today's story in Jeremiah is apparently the first anyone hears that he'd been set aside as a prophet since before he was born. This is Jeremiah's first lesson in being a prophet, as God blasts over his objections with a holy, "You don't always get to do what you want." Prophet-ing is the kind of job for which the successful candidates are brought in, kicking and screaming. It is a Biblical truism that if you *want* to be a prophet, you probably aren't. Until we get to Jesus. Surprisingly, his Messianic and prophetic claims today are not what brings his neighbors to such murderous intent. In first-century Palestine, "Plays well with others" meant the kind of rules used by the Chicago political machine—hometown miracles come first, and a major part of the prophet's job is to constantly remind God that *we* are the divine favorites. Jesus apparently did not get the memo. He did *not* "play well with others."

For Jeremiah, God is irresistible. In his case, "he can't *not*," since God will not take "no" for an answer. For many of my seminary classmates, this was their experience of call to ministry. But the irresistibility of God is not the case for everyone, nor is that kind of clarity and persistence sustainable in most people's daily lives. While I firmly believe the legitimacy of this sense of call, you are not likely to hear me say, "God has a plan for you" in that really portentous voice. That phrase, that voice, always makes me feel there is a right way and a wrong way, and I'd better not guess wrong, even though God isn't helping me figure it out. I don't usually experience God in Jeremiah's crystal-clear terms, nor do I think God is so rigid about our lives that there's a single course of action to take, and if we miss it at the beginning of our lives, we're stuck until the end.

Jeremiah received a specific directive about God's plan for him; Jesus claimed the Isaiah text was fulfilled in him. We might not experience that, even though I believe God intends and requires our cooperation in bringing about the Reign of God. God may be irresistible, but God also respects our opinion regarding our participation. God is as anxious to hear what gives us joy as we are to experience it. And God is more than

willing to transform and equip us for that. I do not deny there are times when, like Jeremiah, we have to say “I can’t *not*.” But most of us live our lives *hoping* we make a difference, *wishing* the world will be a better place because we lived in it. We just can’t be sure that will happen, so those hopes and wishes are probably not enough to determining the course of our actions. We don’t always know the consequences of our response to God’s call.

On the other hand, this doesn’t mean we’re off the hook. It is still incumbent upon us to earnestly seek God’s direction, to act as if God didn’t err in creating each one of us with a set of unique gifts and potential for contributing to the kingdom of God. If we’re willing, God will equip us as needed. Show up, be willing, listen for leading, act. God will do the rest. God may be irresistible, but God is also respectful. We can resist God’s call, God’s claim on our lives. We can say “no” to God’s insistence that we take the next step in deepening our faith and living out our baptismal vows to “try to be like Jesus.” Living with my grandson last week, I saw on an intimate level that toddlers are not always the best judges of what to eat, whether or not a nap is necessary, and the wisdom of watching Curious George on TV all day.

Thank God, we don’t always get to do what we want, nor do we always get to see the consequences of accepting our call. One of my lectionary group buddies experienced this. My friend, Jon, was a seminary intern last year at a Portland church, but he was in Haiti on January 12 as part of his final year work at Wartburg Lutheran Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. Jon, his cousin Ben, and his cousin’s wife, Renee, were teaching theology to prospective Haitian pastors. They had finished class for the day and were visiting the St Joseph Home for Boys when the shaking started. Jon and Renee were along the wall by the windows; Ben was in the middle of the room. Everyone was panicking, trying to hang on to something. They could see Ben trying to hold the pillar next to him while concrete fell all around him. As Renee tried to reach him, the two floors above collapsed, trapping them. Once the shaking stopped, Jon and Renee were able to crawl out through a small opening and onto the roof of the building next door, where they jumped to the ground. As the aftershocks continued, they ran around the building calling to Ben. They couldn’t see him, but they could hear him. Ben, the consummate musician, was singing. He was singing hymns. His last words were sung words: “God’s peace to us we pray.”

As the son of two Lutheran ministers, Ben knew the flaws of the church and the demands of ministry, yet he thought God had called him to minister through the church. Not because the church was the point or because he thought he could fix it, but because he believed God had called him to be part of its ministry. God’s purpose is bigger than the flaws in the church, bigger even than the church itself. When we are called to serve in the church, friends, it is not to serve this congregation, nor even the Church (capital C). Our call is to God’s purpose. That means faithfully showing up, even when the world all around us is shaking and falling. That means simply trying to do what we’re called to do, even when we don’t know how it will turn out. That means trusting God for the consequences.