

"I Am Only a _____"
Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
Lectionary Year C
January 31, 2010
Texts: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:21-30
Dr. David T. Howeth

Our passage of scripture from the Old Testament book of Jeremiah is what biblical scholars refer to as a "call narrative," because this is the story of the prophet Jeremiah's call by God. There are many such call narratives in the Old Testament, stories in which individuals are commissioned by God to do certain specific things.

These call narratives tend to follow a predictable form, kind of like an episode of *House*, where his "ah-hah" moment when he figures out what is killing the patient comes in the middle of a completely unrelated conversation he is having at exactly ten minutes before the show is over.

In the case of call narratives, here is the form: There is an initial statement by God in which the person being called is summoned to perform a certain task. Then there is a negative reaction by the person that stresses his or her weakness or sin. Finally, God speaks a word of reassurance to the individual God is calling. Reduced to its briefest form and borrowing from the vernacular of our day, the conversation between God and the person God is calling goes like this:

God: Hey dude, I got a job for you.

Person: No way, 'cause I'm just a geek.

God: Yes way, 'cause I'm the God who can do great things with just a geek like you.

Moses had this kind of conversation with God. Remember? God said to Moses at the burning bush in the desert, "I need you to go back to Egypt and convince Pharaoh to set my people free," to which Moses responded, "There's no way I can do that, God, because I stutter." God said in reply, "Well then I'll let your brother Aaron do the talking for you, you just carry the big stick and point it where I tell you to." When the Lord called Gideon to deliver Israel from the Midianites, recorded for us in the book of Judges, Gideon said to God, "I'm afraid you've got the wrong guy for the job, Lord. I'm too small to lead a large army." God responded by drastically downsizing the army, making it small enough for even Gideon to lead.

Abraham questioned how God could make the old man the father of a nation when he didn't have any children then and was too old to have any in the future. Abraham's wife didn't voice her doubts to God directly; she just laughed behind his back. "Me, pregnant, what a joke!"

Jonah didn't even give God the courtesy of that much of an argument. When God called this prophet to go to Ninevah, Jonah hopped a freighter going in the opposite direction. That's the passive-aggressive, non-confrontational way of trying to say "no thank you" to God.

Do you see the pattern to these call narratives and how they play out? What is funny to me about all these stories is how the people in them all seem to think the same thing about God, namely, that God is really dumb and has made a stupid mistake in choosing them for the job. Think about that. *They all seem to be saying to God that he must not know what he is doing.* And they assume God is completely clueless about them. Like God didn't know that Moses stuttered or that Gideon

was a runt or that Abraham and Sarah's biological clocks had quit ticking altogether? Like Jonah could really run away from God? Did these people forget who was calling them, the Creator of the universe, who knows all things and sees all things? It looks that way.

And so Jeremiah is in good company when he tries to beg off because of his age and says, "I'd like to help you, God, but I'm too young to vote." It would be easy to pick on Jeremiah, but let's not be too hard on him and too hasty to criticize his hesitation about serving God. For one thing, we need to keep in mind the times in which his calling from God took place. Politically, socially, economically, and religiously, the nation Jeremiah lived in was a mess. It was about the worst time in the country's history [Soards et al, p. 127]. Things really were going to hell in a handbasket. You can almost hear Jeremiah saying to God, "Things are out of control here, Lord. What we really need are a few good men, not one measly kid."

And Jeremiah was not exactly the picture of a prophet. Given what we gather from passages in the book of Jeremiah, he appears to have been the kind of reflective, private person for whom the hard public life of a prophet of God must have been absolutely repulsive [Cousar et al, p. 123]. He was a stay in his room and read or play video games kind of kid, not exactly a prophet-in-the-making.

So maybe we can't blame Jeremiah too much for having a certain reticence about taking God up on his offer. Besides, what would we do if we came face to face with God and God's request of us? We'd probably start thinking of all the reasons why we are completely unfit to do whatever it is God wants us to do. In the face of the holiness, the

otherness, the glory of God, what else are we going to see in the reflection of brilliance of God's presence but the magnitude of our flaws and shortcomings? All we would do if we were in Jeremiah's shoes is to fill in the blank with some different attribute of ours. "You can't mean me, God, for I am only a whatever."

But the reality is that all of us stand precisely where Jeremiah stood—before God and being called by him to do something for him. That's right. *God is calling each of us* to some task, some assignment, some job, some ministry—not just at church, but to labor for God in the workplace, in our community, among our friends, and within our families. None of us is exempt from this call. It comes to each one of us in some form or fashion. And all of us, in our own way and with our own litany of negative characteristics, recite to God why we are not well suited for duty in his kingdom.

Why do we do that? Why do we say "no thank you" to God? For the same reason Jeremiah did, I think. *We are insecure.* We are insecure about who we are and what we can do. We are full of self-doubt. We feel inadequate. We don't think we have what it takes. We are afraid to try, because we are deathly afraid of failure. We think we can't cut it, because all we can see are the things we lack. We are insecure, and insecurity says, "I can't do it."

So what is it we need in the face of our insecurity? Is it confidence? That's what the world often tells us. We need to feel better about ourselves, to believe in ourselves. We have the right stuff; all we have to do is to put it to work. All we need to do is read the right self-help book from the gazillions that are on the shelves in the

book store, or attend the right motivational seminar from the gazillions there are to choose from, follow the six or ten steps to reaching our potential successfully, and we can do whatever we are called to do. Confidence says, "I *can* do it." Is that what we need?

I want to suggest to you that the Bible points us toward something we need more than confidence. Look again at what God says to Jeremiah. He says to the prophet-to-be, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; . . ." God is saying to the boy, "I've had my eye on you for a long time, in fact, ever since you were conceived."

But I think that's not all God is saying. I think God is saying to Jeremiah, "Look, I know you at the molecular level. I know your genes and chromosomes. I know how you're wired up and what makes you tick. I know your personality type, what your Myers/Briggs profile is. I see your potential. I understand what you're capable of. I comprehend things about you that you can't. I know you better than you know yourself."

And God doesn't stop there. In the face of Jeremiah's protests, that he is a boy and doesn't have the gift of gab, God says, "I will give you the words. Don't be afraid. I will deliver you. I won't let you mess up." Can you see what needs to happen when we are called by God, as each of us is? What we must have to combat our own feelings of insecurity and inadequacy is not confidence. Self-confidence is important, but it is not enough. *What we must have is faith.* Faith. It works like this: Insecurity says, "I can't do it." Confidence says, "I *can* do it," but the problem is the same in both cases, because there is no

God in those statements, only I. I can't or I can. But faith says something different. Faith says, "God can. God can. God can do it, and God can do it through me because of who God is and because of who I am."

Can you see the mistake that gets made in Jeremiah's call narrative, like every other one of them? The focus of the person being called gets stuck on himself or herself, rather than on God. But when we are called by God, what we must do is allow ourselves to have the faith to say that *God is capable of doing in and through us whatever God desires*. God wants us to be partners with him in doing great things. And God knows what great things we are capable of doing with his guidance.

So what about our flaws and shortcomings? Faith knows a couple of things about them. Faith knows first of all that God can and does call us not only in spite of those flaws and shortcoming, but oftentimes because of them. Do you understand that? *God calls us because of our flaws and shortcomings*, not just in spite of them. God can use our weaknesses as well as our strengths. And when we succeed, because we are far less than perfect, we have to know that the credit is to be given to God and not to ourselves. Our flaws and shortcomings can keep us humble and mindful of the importance of God in our lives.

Faith knows something else about our flaws and shortcomings, namely, that God will help us compensate for them. As God did for Jeremiah, God will do for us: he will give us what we need. *God always provides the resources needed for those he calls*. Always. God equips the saints. If God wants you to do something for him, he will help you to

compensate for whatever natural or innate obstacles that may be standing in your way, if you will allow him to do so.

"I am too young. I don't speak well." So says Jeremiah to God. What are *you* saying? I'm too young? I'm too old? I don't have enough experience? I don't have enough time? I don't know enough? I am only a single person? I am only a single parent? I have too many problems? I am from a small town? I'm in poor health? I am only a layperson? I am not talented or creative? I didn't grow up in the church? I have too many family obligations?

But *it's not who you are*. Not entirely. That's not the stance of faith. *It's who God is* and what God can do through you, because of who you are and because of who God is and what God can give you. Believe that and you can respond positively to whatever God is calling you to do. It worked for Jeremiah, and it can work for you.