

SLD01.28.07 4th Ordinary
Emory Presbyterian Church
Jeremiah 1:4-10
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“The Language of God’s Call”

A narrative is a story. A call narrative is a story about someone who has been called by God to do or be something. Our sermon text this morning is Jeremiah's call narrative, the story of how Jeremiah was called to be a prophet of God.

Imagine for a moment that you are a Jewish teenage boy living in Jerusalem around 630 B.C.E. You're from a nice family, the men are all respected priests, and you hope one day to follow their footsteps, even if life around the temple has been a little dicey recently what with all the changes King Josiah has been making. Still, your elders say Josiah's reforms are predominantly for the best. So week after week you study Torah faithfully with all the other boys aspiring to be priests, and fantasize about what it would be like to be an important player in the temple cult. Then one day, out of the blue, God decides to speak to you directly:

God: “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.”

Jeremiah: “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.”

God: “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you.”

Then the Lord put out his hand and touched Jeremiah's mouth; and the Lord said to him,

God: “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.”

Call narratives such as this one abound in scripture and generally follow a similar pattern. God speaks unexpectedly to some undeserving body who basically wants nothing to do with the program. God insists, offers reassurance, and, if necessary, a persuasive miracle or two.

Remember the story of Moses' call? (Ex. 3) There was Moses out on a hillside minding his own business, which at the time was tending his father-in-law's flocks, when an angel of the Lord suddenly appears before him in the form of a burning bush.

Moses backs off in fear and covers his face as God announces to the cowering figure:

God: "I will send you to the pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." I

Moses: "Right. And who am I that I should go to the pharaoh?"

God: "I will be with you."

"Prove it!" is written all over Moses' face. So God works a miracle or two. *Still* Moses won't cooperate, reacting instead with a series of side-stepping "yeah buts."

Moses: "Yeah, but who do I say that you are? Yeah, but suppose they don't listen to me. Yeah, but what if they don't believe me? Yeah, but I can't talk straight."

God: "I will be your mouth, and I will teach you what you are to speak."

Moses: "Oh Lord, please send somebody else."

You get the idea.

Or perhaps you recall Gideon, the wimp of Manasseh, the least of his clan's litter, to whom the angel of the Lord appears in Judges 6:

Angel: "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior."

(God obviously sees us differently than we see ourselves.)

Gideon: "Oh yeah? Then how come we're so miserable? How come we're all

eating crow because of those mean old Midianites? Anyway, what happened to all those miracles that used to seal the deal?"

Angel: "I commission you to deliver Israel from the Midianites."

Gideon: "You commission *me*? Oh come on, God! I'm the puniest one in my family!"

Angel: "But I will be with you, Gideon, and you will strike down the Midianites."

Gideon: "Yeah, right. Not that I don't believe you, Lord, but could you supply me with an elaborate sign or two?"

Angel: (Makes hand motions)

Gideon: "Oh no! You really *are* God. Oh geez! What am I going to do now?"

Yes, scripture is full of stories about people being called by God, as well as about humanity's shameless resistance. Despite the fact that God forms us in the womb, establishes our purpose, and consecrates us to it, we created ones seem forever inclined to resist, object, fear, rationalize and generally make ourselves miserable avoiding doing and being what God created us to be and do.

Now personally, I have precious little sympathy for the equivocations of these Old Testament Called Ones who receive their assignments from the Almighty in exclusive, customized, neon Hebrew. I mean, I know God hands out some pretty tough assignments but I like to think that if a flaming angel appeared before you or me with all the attendant special effects, we'd pretty much be inclined to go along with the program.

And these guys argue about it? Never mind the angels, miracles and special effects, most seekers today would give the right half of their heart for one measly straightforward *suggestion* from God, never mind an ungarbled face-to-face divine

directive!

But, as we all know, God doesn't seem to do the flaming angel/burning bush thing much any more. Maybe it didn't prove all that effective an approach. Or maybe God never *has* gone the Cecil B. DeMille route all that often. What do you bet that for every tidy, high profile call narrative included in the canon, there are thousands, maybe millions of quiet miracles missed, angels ignored, signs misinterpreted, voices gone unheard. Maybe the problem is not God's approach so much as our attention.

Some of you may have read a popular book published a few years ago called *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*. There's a scene early on in *The Divine Secrets* in which one of the Ya-Ya's, Vivi, who is in the midst of a complex relational struggle with her daughter, walks down to the edge of the bayou where she lives, and lights two sparklers. Watching the little slivers of light shoot out into the night sky, she starts waving them in the air, the way we do with sparklers. Suddenly she's moved to walk, then run, up and down the edge of the bayou, holding the sparklers over her head, as she thinks to herself, "These are all I have. I do not have the wide, bright beacon of some solid old lighthouse guiding ships safely home past the jagged rocks. I only have these little glimmers that flicker and then go out." (p. 19)

Little glimmers, fleeting flickers, maybe that's more how God tends to speak to the faithful. Maybe those wide, bright beacons of burning bushes and flaming angels have always been the exception. Could be the divine argot has forever been more given to subtle hints, brief insights, flashes of understanding, that flicker briefly and, if left unattended, go out.

Dig a little deeper into the less award-winning call narratives of scripture and

you'll find that scripture abounds with tales of simple revelations, subtle reversals and unexpected insights quietly, subtly, seeded by God into the minds and hearts of seekers; mere sparks of possibility that, when glimpsed, and fanned, grow to change the course of faith and history.

Like the quiet way ancient Sarah was called to have a son, or shady Rahab, to help some spies in Jericho. Surely it was the merest of inner shifts that caused King David to pen some poetry, thrifty Jeremiah to buy a piece of land, cautious Joseph to marry Mary...anyway. With likewise little fanfare did a father forgive his prodigal son; a virgin, prepare her lamp; Zacchaeus, climb a tree; the Magdalene, anoint with oil; Pilate's wife, remember a dream; Ananias, go fetch Saul.

Less dramatic calls, to be sure - subtle, thoughtful, almost imperceptible shifts of mind and heart through which God somehow effects spiritual transformations of seismic proportions far beyond the control, or even the imaginations, of the Called Ones.

I feel it's an important time in the life of this church to be talking again about the language of God's call. Because from where I stand, (and as Robert said last week, from up here you can see *everything*)...From where I stand, the airwaves around this joint practically shimmer with divine chatter. Everywhere I turn in this church, I hear or see people engaged in active divine dialogue. Individuals, groups, the community as a whole.

For example, before I even came there was that whole soul-searching discernment process while Emory and Beverly (the previous pastor) were parting company. Oh, I know the conversation hurt and it wasn't always balanced; folks made mistakes, there was awkwardness and clumsiness and sadness and pain. but God

kept working, working, working, in all the parties, trying to get God's life-giving divine directives through. The church is in a good place now. And I'll tell you what: Beverly's in a good place, too.

Then there was that liminal period following Beverly's departure during which the very survival of this church was on the line; a dramatic, compelling time during which many reached deep into the back pockets of their lives to pull out an energy and leadership they didn't think was there. But it was and so they gave it, and the church survived. More than survived. That tough time in the history of this church cultivated an unprecedented strength and sense of commitment. Tell me that wasn't a call.

And then, of course, there were all the conversations, feelings, signs, shifts, fears, debates, and insights around calling me – focused, intentional, tiresome, exhausting, damnably vague discernment on the part of both myself and the search committee, while God took God's time quietly slipping God's Word in this thought, that fear, this argument, that dream.

Meanwhile, the effort of sustaining the church took its toll and some folks felt called of God to back off and recover. Some are still in recovery. Others stepped forward this year and last to serve on Session. Last week we ordained and installed the class of 2009 and I can't tell you how meaningful it is to me that 3 out of 4 of that class served on the PNC. Because I said to them, if I commit to this church, you've got to promise me that you will, too. And so they have.

All kinds of people around here are chatting with God; listening to God's Word in their hearts. Today we'll enjoy God's call to Nathan and John as we receive them into membership. Next week Elise will join the church – how cool is that? Last week, we

heard Robert Butker preach a well-crafted, creative and sincere sermon that was a blessing to this church. A preaching auto mechanic? Who knew? But God's done weirder things.

Then there's Lillian and her call to tend to that global source of life – clean, fresh water. There's Karen and her Prayer Room – all that beauty and invitation rooted in a very quiet and tender divine tete-a-tete. Or more like coeur-a-coeur. There's Judy's initiative with 'caring crafts' – making beautiful things as a prayerful expression of God's love to those in need. Sounds like Judy doesn't it?,

Or Bennett's culinary madness in the kitchen – an example of Buechner's oft quoted description of call: the intersection of one's greatest gifts with the world's greatest needs.

And how many others, tending to God's voice in your hearts, God's word in your minds, God's power in your limbs?

And then, of course, there are our communal conversations with God, the ways in which God works with this whole body through simple revelations and unexpected insights. What a surprise, to me, anyway; an *exciting* surprise, when not long ago, a majority of you expressed a jones for a deeper, more meaningful, more lively sense of relationship with God – the shorthand for which we use the phrase 'passionate spirituality' – a revelation that continues to define and correct our focus.

Another potential realm of call for this church relates to two vectors of reality rapidly converging – the inexorable expansion of our neighbors, Emory University and Emory Hospital, and the increasing emergence of this church's sense of place and mission.

The University and Hospital have an increasing need for housing and parking; we have an increasing need for reaching out in a relevant way to our community. The University needs for geographic accessibility; we need a stable budget and endowment and a predictable financial future. We also need life-giving, earth-sustaining, mission-supporting facilities.

Is God working through the convergence of these realities? Is God calling to us as to Jeremiah that the time has come to pull down and build up? Who can say for sure. But certainly the air around this church is shimmering with glimmers and sparks of vision, flashes of wisdom and possibility, gleams of optimism and hope. May we all attend carefully to them, lest they flicker and go out, and we miss the language of God's call. To the glory of God. Amen