

“What Not to Say”
Based on Jeremiah 1: 4-10
by Rev. Meghan Davis
Longview Presbyterian Church— August 22, 2010

Throughout the Bible and throughout history, God calls those to service who are reluctant and the unlikely to serve. God does not always call the equipped, God does always equip the called.¹ In a recent issue of *Christian Century*, a United Church of Christ pastor wrote about his grandmother’s call². At the age of fourteen, the Michigan farm girl went to her pastor to talk about her sense of call to ministry. It was the turn of the Twentieth Century and her pastor told her, “I’m sorry, Emma. You must be mistaken. God doesn’t call women into the ministry.” A few days later her father went to the pastor and told him, “If Emma says she’s called to preach, she’s called to preach—and what’s more, she could preach circles around any boy in this county.” Sadly, Emma’s strong sense of call was not recognized by her denomination despite her father’s advocating for her. But eventually, in 1902 she was able to find a denomination that would ordain her and she went on to serve congregations for many years. She didn’t seek out ministry by choice, she didn’t seek it out because she’d ever seen a woman minister or because she liked public speaking—apparently she was almost painfully shy—God sought her out, God called her and she was compelled to answer the call despite the obstacles.

Vocation, vocation, vocation. Today’s passage contains Jeremiah’s call and the blessing and burden of vocation. An oft quoted definition of vocation is Frederick Buechner’s: “the place where our deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” Vocation is what we are called by God to spend our life’s energy pursuing, what brings wholeness and balance into our lives and the lives of others. Just as Jesus brings wholeness and balance in healing in today’s Gospel lesson, so we are called.

The passage contains typical features of a prophetic call narrative: First, God’s initiating word: “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.” Next, objection from the prophet: “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” Then chastisement: “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you.” Followed by reassurance: “Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.” And finally, commissioning: “Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, ‘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.’”

God says “before I formed you in the womb I knew you.” There are some pitfalls in this verse. One being the use of this text in the anti-abortion rhetoric, that’s not what I’m talking about here. Another being predestination—but the concept that God has a plan does not necessarily mean that God has planned out every detail of our lives and being—an idea

¹ Thomas R. Steaglad, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 368.

² Martin B. Copenhaver, “Reflections on the lectionary,” *Christian Century*, Vol. 127, No. 16, August 10, 2010, page 21.

that seems to me like a kind of Divine OCD. As Bruce Birch, Dean of Wesley Theological Seminary, notes, “This is less a statement of divine determinism than a decisive witness that a call to God’s service is not a carefully considered career choice...divine initiative comes decisively from outside of the prophet and requires a response. This divine compulsion precedes any of our careful decision-making processes, often in times and ways that do not fully make sense in human terms.”³ Just as Emma’s call didn’t make sense to her pastor.

God says, “before I formed you in the womb I knew you.” It’s so beautiful, so comforting. Perhaps, like me, this verse reminds you of other verses like Psalm 139 “you knit me together in my mother’s womb.”⁴ And then that verse reminds me of the description of the formation of the church in Ephesians, “speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.”⁵ The sense is of God intimately, painstakingly, putting Jeremiah together. The sense is of God intimately, painstakingly, putting each of us together, too. And God continues to intimately and painstakingly put us together as a church. With all the love and attention that God puts into forming us, we are reminded of the sanctity of our lives. If God has taken such care and interest in our formation, we should respect and care for ourselves accordingly. We should respect and care for our bodies, our minds, our souls and our relationships as the precious gifts from God that they are. We should seek wholeness and goodness for ourselves and others.

Jeremiah protests: “Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” Jeremiah, is looking for excuses, and really, who can blame him? God is calling on him to deliver a message of doom and gloom to the leaders and people of Israel to repent or suffer. He faces ridicule, bodily harm and perhaps even death by delivering these messages so it’s understandable that Jeremiah resists. Like most prophets in Israel from Moses to Ezekiel to Jonah and indeed many modern-day pastors, fulfilling God’s will is rarely our first choice. It is rarely our favorite choice. But it is the *best* choice. God responds to Jeremiah, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you.” Jeremiah is not allowed to hide behind excuses and neither are we. As a church we cannot throw up our hands saying, “we’re only a small church” or any other excuses. We have been consecrated for great things.

God’s response to Jeremiah continues, “Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you.” God’s promise is to be with Jeremiah and with us. The promise isn’t to make everything easy. The promise isn’t that everything will be butterflies and rainbows. The promise is to be with us. When we follow God’s will for us, we will never be alone.

And then God “put out [God’s] hand and touched [Jeremiah’s] mouth; and the LORD said to [him], ‘Now I have put my words in your mouth.’” And again, there is an intimacy with God. Surely life is never the same after God touches your mouth and puts words in it. Then God continues, “See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,

³ Bruce C. Birch, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 367.

⁴ Psalm 139:13

⁵ Ephesians 4:15-16

to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” Today’s scripture passage ends with a word of hope, but it also contains some language that might cause us some discomfort. God speaks of plucking up and pulling down, destroying and overthrowing. Jeremiah is called to speak these unwelcome words to the leaders and people of Israel calling them back to right relationship with God. The consequences of their failure to heed God’s word spoken through Jeremiah, will be the Babylonian exile.

In the book and movie, *Eat Pray Love*, Elizabeth Gilbert’s life was broken down by an unhappy, unfulfilling marriage, by a nasty divorce and by paralyzing depression. Her life was then re-built through important friendships and a year-long journey in which nourished her body, soul and heart. She fed her body—literally—in Italy; in India she fed her soul in the practice of prayer and in learning to forgive herself; in Bali she learned love—not only romantic love, but first, and perhaps more importantly, she learned to love herself in a new way made possible only by her growth in the earlier stages of her journey. She could only love another and be in a healthy relationship once she found wholeness and balance in discovering enjoyment of life, spiritual focus and forgiveness and love of self.

God’s call for Jeremiah isn’t just about speaking the truth to power—though that is the first and vital aspect. God calls Jeremiah is to build and to plant. What are we called to build and to plant? When we think of what we are called to build and plant do we jump up and say let’s do it? Or are we tempted to say, “I’m just a child. It’s too much for me. It’s too much for us.”

God calls us to lives of fullness and wholeness. Sometimes we have to be broken down in order to be built up again. Jeremiah had the unenviable task of warning the rulers of Israel that they would fall, but God’s hope, God’s promise to build and plant was also part of the message God gave Jeremiah.

Sally Brown, a professor at Princeton Seminary writes, “When we are called as individuals or congregations into the service of God’s word and way, God’s passion for goodness and wholeness becomes our passion as well, taking shape amid the specific realities of the contexts where we bear witness.”⁶ God designated Jeremiah to be a prophet before he was even conceived. What has God designated for us? How are we called by God to spend our life’s energy? How are we called to bring balance into our lives, into our church and into the others? These are questions for us each to ponder individually and as a church. What is our vocation, our blessing and our challenge in life, to seek and fulfill God’s call for each of us as individuals and as a community of faith?

⁶ Sally A. Brown, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 367