
“Thus Saith the Lord: You Are Called”

A SERMON on Jeremiah 1:4-10 for the 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

Preached 24 August 2025 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister

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“You should only become a minister if you can’t do anything else.” Something to that effect was one of the bits of wisdom I remember from one of my seminary internship pastors, Reverendo José A. Rosa, pastor of La Primera Iglesia Congregacional de Chicago. Pastor Rosa and I didn’t have the closest of relationships, but I deeply respected—and still do—his work, his experience, and his wisdom.

Of course, as I said though, one of those pieces of wisdom was that he also told people they shouldn’t go into the ministry unless they can’t do anything else. I do not believe that Pastor Rosa wanted a ministry filled with the drop-outs and losers who couldn’t make a go of it anywhere else. It’s not that I and other ministers—including Pastor Rosa—don’t have the skills, talents, or abilities to do any number of other things, and even to do them well.

And yet, what Pastor Rosa said is true. I am here, as I suspect many of my colleagues are, because we simply can’t do anything else.

This sense of something being that which we simply *have* to do, that which we *must* do, in order to be at peace and harmony with our sense of who we are and what we’re here for—that’s what we in Christian and other circles mean when we talk about this thing known as “call.” For people like those Pastor Rosa commended, being in the church’s ministry is simply something they have to do, because not doing so would be at odds with the person they’ve been created to be.

But that sense of transcendent purpose is by no means limited to the authorized ministerial offices of the church, even if we too often have only thought of them that way. Some of us are parents, because we can’t *not* be and still be true to our sense of identity and purpose. Some of us are teachers, artists and musicians, activists and peacemakers, handimen and handiwomen, and so on... because that’s what we were created to be. That’s what God has called us to be. Some of us get the awesome opportunity to live out these called vocations through our employment; others of us, for better or worse, end up fulfilling our vocations *avocationally*, in places and times other than our primary paycheck producing positions.

I can’t say for sure just what it was that Jeremiah did in order to make a living—what his primary paycheck producing position was—although I suspect that being a prophet was probably not a well-paid enterprise. He may have been part of a priestly group, which means the community would have supported him as part of the community infrastructure. Or who knows... maybe he worked third shift at the local 7-11, leaving his daytime free for prophetic proclamation.

Whatever it was that ‘brought home the bacon’ for Jeremiah—kosher turkey bacon, of course—we’ve heard in today’s scripture that it was the work of a prophet for which God had created Jeremiah. “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.”

Sometimes we in our own times chafe against the idea that God has a pre-determined destiny or plan for us. It runs up against our sensibilities that we can be whomever and whatever we want to be, that in our free will we get to choose our life path. And yet when we are honest with ourselves, we know that there are things that fit well with our inborn gifts and talents, our natural sense of our own being and identity and purpose.

Moreover, in our better moments, we’re able to give ourselves over to the reality that God does not leave us helpless, nor does God leave us purposeless. And in particular, when we look at a time like that in which Jeremiah lived, how amazing it is that God had a word to be spoken into

that reality, a word of correction, a word of comfort, a word of compassion, a word of confrontation.

In Jeremiah's time, the people (the nation) was caught in a cycle of unfaithfulness to the covenant and the commitment between God and the people. We'll hear more about this in the coming weeks as we stop off various places in the book of Jeremiah. But right here from the outset, with this opening scene of Jeremiah responding to the call placed upon his life, the call to be "a prophet to the nations," what seems especially wonder-worthy is the reality that God would not leave the people without a word, without a voice to speak forth full of God's commitment. Even as the people's faithfulness and fidelity wandered, God did not—even if the word that then needed speaking involved confrontation as much as comfort, that the word would pluck up as much as it would plant, that it would overthrow as much as it would build. It is still a wonder to behold. As preacher and teacher-of-preachers at Princeton Sally Brown puts it, "God yearns over humanity with a love too profound to turn a blind eye to our self-absorption and self-deception, indifference[,] or intolerance. There will be times when the *anguish* of God claims us for bold word and action."¹ And yet, such a bold call is not beyond us, or even without its joy of sorts, because, as Sally Brown adds, "God's promise to sustain us will make such work bearable."²

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I think it's an understatement to say that we ourselves live in fraught times. We look around at our world, and seeing natural disasters, wars and humanitarian atrocities, and, moreover, the breakdown of systems and institutions that seemed secure—we look at all of that and perhaps wonder if things have ever been so bad. (I think probably they have; it's natural for each generation to look and claim they have the worst [and also the best] of what has ever been.)

But even now, God does not leave us without a word and does not leave us without voices to proclaim that word. For indeed, *we* are ones who have been let in on the 'secret' that it is God who has known us from even before we knew ourselves. It is God who has claimed us from even before we could claim God. And it is God who appoints us—yes, even *us*—to be witnesses among each other and to the nations.

If this seems like too much, like too big a burden to bear, too weighty a responsibility to hold, we will not be the first to feel that way. As we have heard, even Jeremiah—this one we know as the great prophet, the prophet called forth to speak God's powerful word of confrontation and of hope—even Jeremiah thought himself inadequate for the task. That call may be what he was created for, what he was consecrated for from even before his birth, but that doesn't mean he felt up to the job. "I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."

After all, how many of us confidently knew ourselves ready for any of the things we've been called and created for? You who are parents, how many of you thought yourselves ready on day one? You who are teachers, how many of you walked onto the job on day one, confident you were ready for anything and everything that vocation would throw at you?

But in as much as any of these calls, these vocations, these ultimate purposes are about *us* and *our* living into all that we were created to be, when it comes right down to it, they are about *God*, and *God's* passionate commitment to us, and *God's* ultimate initiative. As famous Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says in relation to Jeremiah's call to be a prophet, "The

¹ Sally A. Brown, homiletical commentary on Jeremiah 1:4-10, in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Year C, vol. 4 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, ____), 369. Emphasis added.

² Ibid.

word overrules its bearer. The message *requires* the messenger.”³

In Jeremiah’s time, God in great grace and goodness called forth a reluctant soul, and equipped that soul by God’s own power to carry forth the word that God was speaking in that time. It was not an easy word, or easy work for the prophet, because indeed, in the face of injustice, callousness, and unfaithfulness, the word to be spoken was often a word of confrontation and challenge—a word that indeed would pluck up and pull down, destroy and overthrow. But not only in the promise of God to be with Jeremiah in that work, but in that challenging word itself, God made known the truth that God was still alive and active, caring and concerned, passionate for the ultimate fate of God’s people.

All of that is true still, in this day, my friends. Gathered here in this place, we see in the waters of our baptism that God has claimed us for great and gracious purpose from even before the point at which we could respond. We hear in the witness of the Word proclaimed the truth of a God who still cares passionately about God’s people, a God who stays in relationship with us—albeit sometimes corrective relationship—even when we go astray. We taste in the feast at Christ’s table the good news of a God who offers God’s own self for the life of the world, and we touch the seal and token of a God who is powerful even over death.

And hopefully, sisters and brothers, here in this place *our* mouths are being filled with a word to speak: a word of God’s passionate commitment to speak anew in every age, a word that has the power to pluck up the weeds of injustice and cruelty and violence strewn about this world, a word that has the power to build dreams and plant hope-beyond-hope.

So, my friends, seeing, hearing, tasting, filling up on all these things, the truth is that you—yes, *you*—are called.

After all, thus saith the Lord.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 26. Emphasis added.