

“Answering the Call”

Sermon Title: “Called to Hope”

Preaching Text: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6

FUMC—Arlington, Texas 76011

4th Sunday after the Epiphany—31 January 2016

“Each morning brings new hope”

(—Lailah Gifty Akita).

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Thursday morning as I had filled the horse troughs with water to last for the day—I goofed. The night had been down to about 30-32 degrees. As I shut off the last water faucet the PVC pipe broke off at the faucet. Water shot straight up three feet and I ran and turned the water off at the street. I called the plumber. He told me he was on a call to Duncanville, but would come by right after lunch. He would give me a head’s up as he was on his way. I told him no hurry as I had already shut off the water.

Saying no hurry at 7:30 in the morning is a little different than waiting for a plumber call-back at 2:30, then 3:30 . . . and then at 4:30. He would soon be working in the dark. So it is as one waits for the plumber to call. Sure not that important—unless one has been charged by one’s wife to wash the clothes, dishes, and so on with no water while she is gone all day caring for her mother. Is no water a credible excuse?

Jeremiah will say he is but a youth. Thus, his waiting on a call did not seem that tedious. Yet all of us who believe that our life has a purpose/meaning beyond eating, drinking, and being merry . . . want a call that gives us worth. Often in our world of knowing/experience we call the caller . . . God. Hear God’s call to Jeremiah.

4 Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, 5 “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.”

6 Then I said, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” 7 But the Lord said to me, “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. 8 Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.

9 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. 10 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” (Jeremiah 1:4-10).

There are many “call stories” in the Bible. In fact, there are so many we can only name a few of the most high-profile call stories. Moses was the king of the “stone-wallers.” If we read the texts from Exodus 3 and 4 we will see that Moses really knew how to block God’s mandate that Moses go to Pharaoh. Yahweh requests, but Moses continues to refuse to do anything but give the Deity evasive answers. He also questions why God would choose him. God tussled with Moses for quite some time for Moses to answer his call. Moses hesitated many times when called by God but eventually he answered the call.

We can read about other Hebrew scripture characters who did not hesitate like Moses and Jeremiah. Rather these acted in faith almost promptly to God’s call. God asked Abram [Abraham] to depart to a land he would show him. There God promised to make Abram a great nation (see: Gen 12:1-3). This was Abram’s response: “So Abram went as Yahweh told him . . .” (Gen 12:4). The prophet Isaiah responds to his call announcing: “Here I am, send me” (Isa 6:9). Each these four responded with a “yes” to God; Moses and Jeremiah after a resisting, and Abram and Isaiah with more surety.

But a call from God is an invitation and not simply a command. If we remember the story of the so called “rich young ruler” we recall that he could not go along with Jesus invitation (Mark 10:17-22). He went away gloomy because he wanted to follow Jesus but he also wanted to keep his sizeable possessions. From him and perhaps others we learn that answering God’s call is stirring. Yet when we say yes to one thing we say no to many others. Mary had her call as did Elizabeth according to Luke. Each call is different, but in a sense each is similar.

Let’s turn to familiar elements in Jeremiah’s call story that may end up in many if not most call stories. We might even call them common patterns in Scripture. How does our call—if we can actually identify it—fit into these patterns that the Bible offers us?

The first thing that happens in the call stores is that God interrupts a person and then God

introduces us to God's task assigned to us. Here is a doozy of a call story:

1 Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3 Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" 5 He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6 But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do (Acts 9:1-6).

God interprets Saul who thinks he is doing God's work. Knocks him down and tells him to go to "the city" which is Antioch because God through Jesus is just beginning to give Saul his marching orders. And thanks to this interruption and this set of instructions Paul has a task to the end of his life—and we are still talking about the old guy 2000 years later. Anyone who has seen the film *It's A Wonderful Life* knows that one thing always happens to George Bailey: whatever he is planning to do and wanting to do always get sidetracked. In fact, the sidetracking of his plans creates the wonderful life portion of the film—although we do not see it until near the end. Perhaps God has interrupted your life in some way similar to this?

Another aspect of the common call pattern in the Bible is that those who hear the call resist it—if they dare. Not every biblical character resists the call as we saw with Abram and Isaiah. Yet with Moses, Jeremiah, and the Rich Young Ruler there is a great deal of resistance to God's invitation and claim on their lives. If we ever want to learn how to refuse another person's request of us, brush up on Moses denial of God in Exodus 3 and 4. Moses is a master at befuddling even the Lord God Almighty! Genius! Moses reminds me of Jim Moore's great book title: *Yes, Lord, I Have Sinned, But I Have Several Excellent Excuses*.

Despite the excellent excuses, God pursues the invitation that we are calling "the call." God continues to assert that we can do what God asks of us. God assures us and promises to empower us to do what God calls us to do. Empower is one of those trendy words that some highly pretentious people use, like paradigm, mnemonic, or lingo. Yet if we think back to God's words to Jeremiah when he said he was but a mere prat—or something like that, God said: "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. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you.”

If you are a Methodist and have been one for a while then you have heard of Aldersgate. In some ways lore has it was a most important moment for the Methodist movement. The Aldersgate experience, per John Wesley’s journal occurred on 24 May 1738. John Wesley at this time in his life was a throng of qualms and misgivings about what God wanted him to do and why. On this particular evening he writes:

I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed

Then as he continues to describe the experience, Wesley wrote: “I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.” God gives us assurance along with God’s presence as he calls us to serve him. All this is wrapped in God’s loving-kindness.

We like those we read about in the Bible and hear about from pulpits even today, know that our age-old human response to any kind of change is fear. Responding to God’s call is a guarantee for change—and this produces what the Bible calls fear (303 times in NRSV), the word “afraid” (189), frightened (10), and anxiety (6). All people have anxiety. There is not an exception to the rule. All people are anxious, but some people handle anxiety better than others. Anxiety as we use the word today was what the ancients called fear and its cognates (another pretentious word). Know that if you hear God calling you it may be loud and clear or it may be more subtle. It may be the voice of one “proclaimed from the housetops” (Luke 12:3) or it may be like the sound of “sheer silence” (1 Kings 19:12). But however the voice comes know that God promises to be with us. That is the kindness and muscle of this call story from Jeremiah: God perceives young Jeremiah’s fear, and God reissues scripture’s most repeated mandate: “Fear not.”