



Worship Series: “A Prophet’s Witness: From Grief to Hope”

14th Sunday after Pentecost

“A Prophet is Called”—Sermon Text: Jeremiah 1:4-10

FUMC Arlington, Texas 76011

21 August 2016

“I say fear must be followed by hope. Hope you do something about it. It’s a call to action”

--Elie Wiesel, Chicago Tribune, 11 February 2002.

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I was on the Central Texas Board of Ministry for 28 straight years, from 1988 until 2016, with six months off to write my dissertation in 1998. The Board of Ministry is the agency of our Annual Conference that qualifies people to ordained ministry. I heard many call to ministry stories—some were unusual and some were about what you might expect. It can be terrifying to hear God call us to do, for example, what God asked Abram to do: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Genesis 12:1). No less terrifying was God’s summons of Jeremiah. Today Jeremiah narrates the Lord’s summons. Hear our day’s lesson:

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).

Note what happens. First, God’s word comes to Jeremiah. Second, Jeremiah protests. Third, God deflects Jeremiah’s protestations and offers him assurance. Fourth, God promises God’s presence. Fifth, God touches his lips and tells Jeremiah that God has put the words Jeremiah needs into Jeremiah’s mouth. Last, God tells Jeremiah that the prophet God has appointed “to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

In most call experiences we can discern four stages of the calling process: God’s call to a

person, the objection to the call, God's encouragement that God offers everything necessary to fulfill the call, and a sign—such as touching the mouth—that seals the deal. Whether in ancient days or today, those who are believers often discern a summons from God.

We might think of a call from God as something of a conversation between an individual and God. Often the call may be mediated between God and a person by some sort of intermediary—like in the case of Moses and Moses' call to liberate the people of God. Moses perceives a bush burning. He also hears God's voice telling him to deliver the Israelites (Exodus 3:1-10). Jonah, Sarah, Paul, Mary, and many, many more have call stories outlined in our Bible. Certainly they protest either covertly or overtly. Yet God constantly reassures them of what it means to respond to the divine summons.

God calls people of today in a variety of ways. Sometimes God speaks in a small, still voice. Other times God may shout out to us in ways that seem like screaming from heaven. Regularly God call us through other people to our great Christian work in life. Nonetheless God calls us in many diverse ways.

If we would respond—indeed answer—such a call, then we might be forced to make key changes in our lives. I ask you to ponder this question for yourself: How often have we said or thought—“This prompting can't be God; I don't have time for this.” The objections we make seem remarkably like those of Moses or Jeremiah or Mary. Have you noticed how we seem to come right out of the biblical tradition?

Moses objected. “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?” (Exodus 3:11) Similar to Jeremiah, Moses is daring in his debate with God. “They'll never believe me!” “How shall this be” asked Mary, after Gabriel had announced that she would conceive a son, “since I have no husband” (Luke 1:34)?

As a child, learning to swim was terrifying. I will not get in the water over my head! My father said: “Yes you will—go ahead and try. I'm right here—nothing to worry about.” We want

assurance when summoned to do the thing we feel is beyond our abilities. But God's response to us is like to Moses: "I will be with you" (Exodus 3:12). New calls to new tasks need the foundation under them that reminds us that God is always there to guide us.

One way we can respond to God's summons is to remember that our call is a fundamental way we can live into the gospel story that shapes our lives. The late Fred Craddock, relates a story about Dr. N. Scott Momaday, a professor of literature at the University of California. Momaday is also a member of a Kiowa Native American tribe and tells about his call into the tribe via another human being.

When Momaday was just a boy, his father took him to a woman of the tribal village early in the morning, left him all day, and picked him up at suppertime. He said that all day long the old woman told stories. They sang old songs, and she described rituals, telling the oral history of the Kiowa people. She told how they began out of a hollow log in the Yellowstone River; of the tribe's migration southward; of the wars with the other tribes; of the coming of the white man; of the buffalo hunts—the slaughter; of the coming of the War; of moving southward again to Kansas; of starvation and disease; and finally, of the arrival at Fort Sill and the reservation and confinement.

Then about dark, Momaday said, my father picked me up. Momaday said, "I left her house a Kiowa" (Cited by Eric S. Ritz, Thanks for the Memories—taken from the tape Preaching Today 22).

Craddock concludes "When youngsters leave our church building, do they leave Christian? To be Christian is to be enrolled in a story, and anybody who can't remember any farther back than his or her birth is an orphan." An orphan is anyone who doesn't have a story. Your call story is the occasion when we remember who we are, where we are from, and where God in Jesus leads us.