

God Calls Jeremiah

The Rev. Dr.
Peter G. James

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Sermon Series:
Calling People to
Faith

*There can be
no calling
without a
caller.*

Paul Brand was uncertain about a vocation as a young man, so he went to work temporarily as an aide in a hospital. While he was on duty, a woman was rushed to the hospital suffering a considerable loss of blood. She had no pulse, and she was as white as a sheet. She was immediately given a blood transfusion. The other medical personnel left to locate additional equipment and blood supplies. While Paul was attending her, he witnessed a most remarkable transformation. He writes:

“Nothing in my memory can compare to the excitement of what happened next. I nervously held the woman’s wrist. Suddenly, I could feel the faintest press of a pulse, or was it my own finger’s pulse? I searched again. It was there; a tremor barely perceptible, but regular. The next bottle of blood arrived and was quickly connected. A spot of pink appeared like a drop of watercolor on her cheek. It began to spread into a beautiful flush; her lips, dark and pink, then red. And her body quivered with a kind of sighing breath. Then, her eyelids fluttered lightly and parted. She squinted at first and her pupils constricted, reacting to the bright lights in the room. At last, she looked directly at me. To my enormous surprise, she spoke, asking for water. That young

woman entered my life for only an hour or so, but the experience left me utterly changed. I had seen a miracle, a corpse resurrected; the creation of Eve when breath entered and animated her body.”

Paul decided, in that moment, that God was calling him to become a medical doctor. Dr. Paul Brand has served for many years in India as a medical missionary. He has become world renowned for his work among leprosy patients.

We’ve been talking about God’s call for the last two months. If you’ve been in and out of worship lately, let me recap the really important stuff.

Our church has a threefold mission: To call people to faith, to equip people for ministry and to send people to love and serve the world. Three little words can help you remember our mission: Call, equip and send. But before we can be equipped for God’s service and sent out to love and serve the world, we must first answer the call.

How is God calling you? How is God calling me? How is God calling VPC?

First, we are called into relationship with God. We are called to someone (namely God) before we are called to do something or go somewhere for God.

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Second, we are called into God's service. While there is one primary call (to enter into relationship with God), there are multiple secondary callings as parents, educators, students, soldiers, retirees, you name it. Doing follows being; doing something for God originates from being in relationship with God.

For the last several weeks, we have been examining various Old Testament call stories. We've looked at God's call to Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Gideon and Samuel. Today, we explore God's call to Jeremiah. Jeremiah's call is recorded in the opening chapter of the book that bears his name. This call story divides neatly into four sections: God's call (verses 4-5), Jeremiah's resistance (verse 6), God's reassurance (verses 7-8) and God's confirmation with a sign (verses 9-10).

God's call comes to Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you." The Hebrew word for know refers to more than intellectual knowing. God's knowing is intensely personal. "Before you were born, I consecrated you; I anointed you a prophet to the nations." In other words, Jeremiah's call has been taking shape his whole life. Even before Jeremiah was *in utero*, God knew Jeremiah. Jeremiah could be a poster child for the saying, "Leaders are born, not made"

Jeremiah, like most other Old Testament personages, resists God's call. "Ah, Lord God, truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." Jeremiah's

excuses are hardly novel, God's people have been fabricating them from the beginning. I'm too old. I'm too young. I'm afraid. I don't speak well. Really now, does God hear any new excuses?

Jeremiah is no more than 18 years of age when God's call comes. What most 18-year-olds have on their minds is not how to become a prophet who will get in peoples' faces to call them to repentance and faith.

God reassures Jeremiah: "Don't 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." Incidentally, God's call to Abraham (Genesis 15:1) and Moses (Numbers 21:34) also included the "be not afraid" summons.

God promises Jeremiah, "I will be with you." God doesn't guarantee Jeremiah all his troubles will disappear and all his foes will be subdued. "I will be with you," is the single most consistent promise God gives people in Scripture.

God's call is confirmed to Jeremiah with a sign (verses 9-10). God reaches out His hand and touches Jeremiah's mouth. God did something similar when He touched Isaiah's lips with a burning coal (Isaiah 6:7).

Jeremiah fulfilled God's call as a prophet for forty years, from 627-587BC. Israel, the northern kingdom, had been overrun by the Assyrians a hundred years previously. Judah, the southern kingdom, including Jerusalem, is about to incur the same fate in the hands of the Babylonians. God will pluck

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up and pull down, destroy and overthrow. Yet, these four negative images are followed by two positive ones. God will not only destroy and overthrow, He will build and plant. “For surely I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord, “plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11).

As I’ve been preaching these call stories, I have noticed something about the people God calls. The people, by and large, God picks for leaders are almost universally the wrong people. It’s almost as if God goes out of His way to pick people without the skills to become great leaders for God. Perhaps God likes a challenge. Maybe God likes to make something out of nothing. Any God who could make a boy like Jeremiah into a prophetic leader must be some kind of God.

God’s choice tells us more about God than the people God calls to lead. Abraham, Moses and Jeremiah are not chosen because they show leadership potential. Their call tells us more about the caller than the called.

Jesus inaugurates his ministry with an odd assortment of no-name fishermen, reviled tax collectors and assorted peasants. No scholars or wealthy patrons comprise his inner circle. They are certainly not the sort of people who would appear on anyone’s Who’s Who list.

The most obvious trait of Jesus’ disciples seems to be their denseness. “Why are you so dull?”

Jesus asks. “How long shall I put up with you?”

I find it positively reassuring that God reaches out to people like Jeremiah to get the job done! Their very ordinariness gives me hope. Jesus doesn’t choose his followers on the basis of potential for greatness. Perhaps Jesus prefers working with unpromising recruits to demonstrate that the power belongs to God and not to us.

Leadership is the rage at universities these days. Leadership study majors are enormously popular, both at the graduate and undergraduate level. Students are flocking to such courses, which is hardly surprising, since most students go to college imagining that one day they will be in charge of something. There are courses offered on macro-leadership and micro-leadership, on leadership skills and leadership techniques. This surge in leadership study is also evident in the business sector, with the interest in leadership institutes and leadership coaches.

There was a study conducted several years ago of ministers who exhibited strength and courage in leading congregations. Ministers who were the most effective leaders had a strong sense of external authorization. That is, they were the pastors who exhibited the clearest sense of being called by God to teach and preach the Word.

What is the leadership principle we learn from Jeremiah? “Go, for I will be with you.” External authorization, we might call it!

Biblical leadership begins with God. Jeremiah’s call commences

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with the words, "The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah." Jeremiah's call is God's idea. Sorry, but Jeremiah's potential for leadership has little to do with it.

It cuts across our grain to see leadership as God's work rather than as something we do. As Jesus put it in Gospel Leadership 101, "You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last" (John 15:16).

Graeme Keith, treasurer of the Billy Graham Association, was on an elevator with Billy Graham when another man in the elevator recognized the reverend.

"You're Billy Graham, aren't you?"

"Yes," Billy said.

"Well," the man said, "you are a truly great man."

"No," Billy responded, "I'm not a great man. I just have a great message."

The great message is that we serve a great God. These call stories tell us more about the caller than the called. Paul writes, "We have the treasure in earthen vessels, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and doesn't come from us" (2 Corinthians 4:7).

Imagine telling an 18-year-old that he will be a prophet to the nations. That he will speak the truth to power. That God will bring down one earthly kingdom for another soon to follow. But this absurdly gracious God is just the sort of God who would call

someone like that. He's just the sort of God who would call people like you and me.

(I am indebted to Chaplain William Williamson of Duke University, whose preaching served as an impetus for this sermon.)

