

Pastor Jonna Bohigian
Not Me, Lord!
Jeremiah 1:4 – 19

This morning, we enter into the second sermon in our series on the prophet Jeremiah. Today, we go to the beginning, to the call of Jeremiah.

He had grown up in a pastor's household, but he would *not* become a pastor. He smiled but inwardly resented parishioners when they would say, "You're going to become a pastor like your dad, Johnny." He *hated* being called "Johnny," but he hated even more the thought of becoming a *pastor*. He had seen the underbelly of the pastoral life – the exhaustion after Sunday mornings, the backburner that families were placed on *not infrequently* to address congregational needs, the strife of the congregation, the expectation to always be good and upright, and the truth that the pastor was human and sinful, just like everyone else. "Not me, Lord!" was his response.

He wanted a glitzier life, a life that could be admired, a life that made his friends wish they were him. And so, he became a pilot. But despite all his effort, he knew that God was calling him to something else. He made plans to become a high school biology teacher. He would go back to school to get his teaching credential, and it was there that he a woman named Debby. He never thought he would fall in love with Debby, because it just didn't make sense. He was ten years older than her. Despite his intentions, he found himself falling in love with her, and so they went to visit her parents.

On their first visit, he sat down with Debby's dad, and her dad was talking *marriage*. You might think that her dad would want to protect his young daughter

like Robert De Niro's character in *Meet the Parents*. But no, he was *initiating* a conversation about marriage *and* telling him what he ought to do. "On a scale of 1,000, you would be at 700 as a biology teacher. But as a *pastor*, you would be right there at 900." Suddenly, the thought of becoming a pastor was no longer something my dad resisted; he somehow knew that my grandpa was inviting him into his calling.

The theme of calling is *intriguing*. Young people might agonize over it, some worry they have missed the boat, while others know they are right where they are supposed to be, some believe that ministry is somehow a higher calling like my grandpa, and others simply don't care.

There is also a common notion that a person's call is *instantaneous*. It is no wonder we think that, because that is how Scripture depicts call stories. Jeremiah is a young man, and the word of the Lord comes to him and tells him that he was created to be a prophet to the nations. Saul is riding on his horse, a light flashes, and he falls off his horse. Jesus speaks to him and calls him. Jesus is walking along the Sea of Galilee, sees some men, and calls them to follow him. Time and time again, we read dramatic and instantaneous stories of call.

In Jeremiah chapter 1, we hear the story of Jeremiah's call. Jeremiah writes that the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jer 1:5). Jeremiah's call is clear. He was created for a purpose, to be a prophet to the nations. He is called to the very task that everyone would rather

avoid – to be the voice of God to a people who won't want to hear. Who would *want* to be the bearer of difficult news, calling people to change their ways?

In response to the word of the Lord, Jeremiah doesn't say that he doesn't want to do it; he says that he is too *young*. He is too young and doesn't have training. His problem is not public speaking, as it was Moses' problem; his problem is that he is being called into a "task for which he is totally unprepared and wholly inexperienced. [Jeremiah] is overwhelmed by his own inadequacy."¹ Shouldn't someone *else* be chosen, someone with more life experience and expertise?

But, in typical God fashion, God doesn't back down, and the reason He gives has nothing to do with Jeremiah's talents. God tells Jeremiah that He has given him the words to speak and that He is with Jeremiah and will deliver him. God's calling of Jeremiah has nothing to do with Jeremiah's life experience or expertise; God's calling of Jeremiah is because of *God* and for God's purposes.

This is the thing about call: a person's call is given *by God* to fulfill *God's purposes*. A person's call is not something one can create; it is *received*. A person's call may be received in an instant like Jeremiah, but for most, it is discovered over time. A person's call is not found in the "*search* for personal fulfillment" but "*in response* to God's voice."² Like Jeremiah, God's call is for *others*. God's call was for Jeremiah's growth, undoubtedly, but God's call of Jeremiah was primarily for *others*, for the *nations*.

Your call and my call is the same. It is not for *us*, though our calls will undoubtedly change us. Our calls are primarily for *others*. This is why Fuller

¹ Robert Davidson, *Jeremiah*, 13.

² Tod Bolsing, *video recording*, Fuller Formation Group.

Seminary Professor, Tod Bolsing, encourages students that loving our neighbor is the starting point for the formation of our call. As Martin Luther said, “Christian [calling] is expressed primarily through one command: To love our neighbor.”³

That is the crux of it all: to love our neighbor. Your calling, and my calling, is to love our neighbor. *How* that takes place will look differently. *No* calling is higher than another calling. Pastor Dan’s calling as bishop is no higher a calling than your calling in the tech industry. My calling as pastor is no higher a calling than your calling to care for an elderly parent or any other calling.

I have a great sadness that many people carry a “hierarchy of calling.” I can’t *tell* you how many people I have met who have served as pastors, *not* because it was their calling, but because they thought it was a higher calling than to what God was *in fact* calling them. I can’t *tell* you how many people I have met who have been disappointed with their lives, because their calling was not to be a pastor. To be a pastor is *one* call; it is not *everyone’s* call, nor is it the *best* call. As Martin Luther once wrote, “The idea that the service to God should have only to do with a church altar, singing, reading, sacrifice, and the like is without doubt but the worst trick of the devil. How could the devil have led us more effectively astray than by the narrow conception that service to God takes place only in a church and by the works done therein...The whole world could abound with the services to the Lord, Gottesdienste – not only in churches but also in the home, kitchen, workshop, field.”⁴

You have important work to do, an important calling, that only *you* can do. You have networks of family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, and colleagues with

³ Bolsing, Fuller Formation Group.

⁴ <https://gospelcenteredwork.org/2010/07/04/luther-on-vocation/>

whom you have influence that the rest of us never could. God has gifted you in particular and unique ways – and if you can't see it, ask a trusted friend. If you are beginning to hear your calling and you feel resistant, you are probably hearing correctly. Like for Jeremiah, the call may seem beyond you. You may be unsure if you have what it takes. It may seem like too much of a risk or that it will move you from your comfort zone. Even after you accept the call, you may wonder if you made a mistake or if you heard incorrectly. This was Jeremiah's case too. In Jeremiah chapter 20, he is *so* unsure of his calling that he questions why he was *born*.

Hearing your call is a scary thing. Your call may not be what you wanted it to be. Your call may not be as glamorous as you hoped. Your call will likely use your gifts, but it will stretch you beyond what you think you're capable of. Your call may change over time and stretch you in *new* ways. Your call will be in service to your neighbor. Your call will drag you out of your "relative security into a life of absolute insecurity."⁵ Your call will be the cross you carry. Your call requires a response.

In Mark 8:34, Jesus calls his disciples and a crowd to listen to him. He says, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Jesus does *not* say, "Whoever wants to be my disciple, must deny themselves and take up *my* cross." He says, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up *their* cross and follow me."

Your calling is your cross. It is the responsibility that *you* have been chosen to carry. And this is why you will want to refuse it. You will want to say, "Not me, Lord! Anyone but me! I don't want to do this!" You won't want to carry this cross, because

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 58.

it will be painful, and it will cause you to die. I am not speaking of dying a physical death, but a death to your sinful self, the one that is always looking out for “me.” This is the self that needs to be put to death daily, so that your new self, your life in Jesus, may live.

The good news is that your call is not based on your life experience or your expertise; it is based on *God*. God is the one who calls you. He sent His only Son to call you to Himself. But your life is more than simply being with God; it is to live in service to your neighbor. And this is why God calls you to a *particular* call – a call to be a son or daughter, a wife or husband, a parent or a friend, an engineer or a janitor. The God who calls you is faithful and will be with you.

As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as a Michaelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.’”⁶

“Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. *He* who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it” (1 Thess 5:23 – 24).

⁶ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/21045-if-a-man-is-called-to-be-a-street-sweeper>