

November 8, 2015

TEXT: Jeremiah 1:1–10

TITLE: Reluctant Response

The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, ²to whom the word of the LORD came in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. ³It came also in the days of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah son of Josiah of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month.

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.’

⁶Then I said, ‘Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.’ ⁷But 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.’

⁹Then 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.’

Sing - “It may not be on the mountain height, or over the stormy sea. It may not be at the battle's front. My Lord will have need of me. But if, by a still, small voice God calls to paths that I do not know, I'll answer, dear Lord, with my hand in thine: I'll go where you want me to go. Send me, I'll go. I'll go for you! Send me, I'll go. If you call my name Lord! Send me I'll go; I'll go for you. Send me, I'll go and do what you want me to do!”

I remember that song from my youth. The Gospel Choir at my home church in Indianapolis would often sing it as they processed into worship. It was always sung with great enthusiasm, fervor and commitment. “Send me, I'll go. Lord, I'll go for you!” As a child, I didn't realize or know that answering God's call with such vigor, conviction and commitment is far from the norm and might be a little theologically incorrect. Typically, when the Lord's call goes out, the response is one of reluctance, uncertainty and surprise. There have been numerous times in my life, too many to count, when I perceived God calling, and my response was not enthusiastic or one of conviction, but instead was reluctant and uncertain, “Sorry God, I'm pretty sure you dialed the wrong number!”

We're in good biblical company when our response to God is less than enthusiastic! Usually, God's call doesn't come when all is right with the world and everything is in spiritual and political order. Instead, God's call tends to come when there is spiritual, political or personal unrest, destruction, injustice or disobedience. Such was the case when Jeremiah perceived God was calling him to service. Jeremiah lived in a period of political and moral crisis; he witnessed his country lose its independence and suffer as a

result of the constant fighting between the Assyrians and Babylonians. It was into this time of transition, political unrest, exile and oppression that the youth Jeremiah, realized there was a call upon his life to be a messenger of the Lord. When the world has lost its way, violence and upheaval are prevalent, and injustice and oppression are running rampant, God's messengers often rise up to call us back to our moral center.

The "Great Soul" Gandhi fought non-violently against the discriminatory policies against people of color in South African and upon his return to his beloved India he devoted the rest of his life struggling against what he considered the three greatest ills of his country: British rule, which he maintained impoverished the people of India; hatred perpetuated by the Hindu/Muslim disunity; and thirdly, the Hindu tradition of classifying millions of Indians as untouchables, those who were born into the lowest social class resulting in severe discrimination.

Likewise, Malala, a young, modern-day activist, was marked for death by the Taliban, because she spoke up and fought for the right for all Pakistani children, especially girls, to be educated. Malala stated very simply: "I dream for all the children that they should go to their school because it's their right...their basic right."

Unlike Malala, Jeremiah, doubted his ability and found himself engaged in a reluctant response, when the word of God came to him: "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you and before you were born, I consecrated you; and appointed you a prophet to the nations." Jeremiah's call was predestined from the beginning of the creation and time, it was preordained; he was chosen, for such a time as this. I stand before you this morning and declare; there is a call on our lives, not necessarily to be proclaimers of God's word, but most certainly to be "doers" of God's word—examples of forgiveness, mercy, grace and love. We are all appointed for such a time as this to stand for what it right, fair, just and to speak truth to power.

Jeremiah's reluctant response was one in which he voiced his perceived inadequacies, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." Most of us can relate to Jeremiah's reluctant response, thinking that our limitations dictate our ability. Brothers and sisters, I'm a witness to the fact that God doesn't call the qualified, but qualifies, equips, consecrates and makes a way for those whom God calls. Our self or socially imposed inabilities, weaknesses, perceptions, limitations or fears, are never a problem for God. God's strength is made perfect in our weakness; God takes the foolishness of this world to confound the wise and nothing, nothing is ever impossible for God! God assured Jeremiah, "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." That is a true word for us today—God is with us, we have nothing to fear!

Over 16 years ago, prayerfully seeking God to discern the call on my life, I remember that more than anything, I was afraid—afraid that I didn't or wouldn't measure up; afraid that people would not accept a woman as a proclaimer of God's word; afraid that my personal life or past decisions would disqualify me from standing before God's people; afraid that I would not be able to afford or complete seminary; afraid of standing before

God's sometimes judgmental people. And yet while realizing that all of those factors might be true, I eventually realized that God was with me and my fears and my past were stepping stones, leading me ever closer to putting my total and complete trust in God, leaning not to my own understanding. God was bigger than any fear I had.

Jeremiah, born into a priestly family, never served as such. Actually, his prophetic proclamations often conflicted with the priests and other so-called prophets of his day. God touched and placed the Word in Jeremiah's mouth, and then completed the call by telling him: "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." When we are called by God, we may find ourselves in a position of opposition, even against those who purport to stand in solidarity with us.

Finding himself jailed in Birmingham, Dr. M.L. King, Jr. responded to a letter written by local, white church leaders who communicated it was unwise and untimely for Dr. King to lead non-violent protests against segregation and Jim Crow laws in their fair city. In his response, Dr. King argued that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere!

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heavens (Eccl. 3:1). God has issued a call to speak against discrimination, to tear down institutions of oppression that divide and separate, to stand for justice and grace, to empower and encourage the least of these, to love one another as we are loved. Although, our response maybe one of reluctance, fear, feeling overwhelmed or filled with despair, we have the assurance that God is faithful and God's word will not return void, but will accomplish that for which God purposed and succeed in the thing for which it was sent (Isa. 55:11).

God's word goes forth today: 'Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.' God calls those who are willing—in spite of a reluctant response; God calls those who put their hope and trust in God; God calls those who are oft-times the most unlikely to upset the status quo. God chose Jeremiah and God chose another unassuming youth, Mary to bear God's son and our savior so that we would know that God has chosen us, to fulfill God's promise which remains true, we have no need to be afraid, for **I am** is with us today, tomorrow and even to the ends of the earth and it is in **I am**, the God who walked with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jeremiah, who also knows, walks, leads and guides us, that we shall be whom we were created to be, in spite of any and all personal issues, inadequacies or reluctance.

Perhaps, the song of my youth was theologically correct after all. "Dear Lord, with my hand in Thine, I'll go where you want me to go, do what you want me to do, say what you want me to say, be who you formed, knew, consecrated and appointed me to be. Send me Lord, I'll go. Amen