

### **The Reading of Jeremiah 1:4-10**

<sup>4</sup>Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,

<sup>5</sup>“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.”

<sup>6</sup>Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” <sup>7</sup>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.

<sup>8</sup>Do not be afraid of them,  
for I am with you to deliver you,  
says the LORD.”

<sup>9</sup>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.

<sup>10</sup>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.”

### The Reading of 1Corinthians 13:1-13

**13** If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup>And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup>If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,<sup>[a]</sup> but do not have love, I gain nothing.

<sup>4</sup>Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup>or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup>it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup>It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

<sup>8</sup>Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. <sup>9</sup>For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; <sup>10</sup>but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. <sup>11</sup>When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. <sup>12</sup>For now we see in a mirror, dimly,<sup>[b]</sup> but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. <sup>13</sup>And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

**February 3, 2019**  
**Jeremiah 1:4-10; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13**  
**“Called to Love”**  
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The Bible tells us multiple call stories, like the one we just heard from Jeremiah. We continue to tell call stories. So how do you know a call story when you hear one?

- The person is presented with a challenge

Jeremiah – Before you were born, I appointed you as prophet to the nations.

- Excuses follow

But I’m just a boy. I won’t know what to say.

- Sometimes a symbolic event happens

The Lord put his hand to my mouth and put the words in it.

- The person has a life-changing choice to make

If you follow this path, your life will turn out differently.

Though the text doesn’t immediately tell us that – we know from our understanding of human story-telling that this kind of beginning foreshadows the start of an adventure.

There are similar events that I could conclude happened in my call story. The truth is though, that I was brought up in the church with all the expectations that involved so the challenges and choices I made may have seemed somewhat dramatic to me, but weren't biblical in proportion. I didn't have a restoration of sight. I wasn't swallowed by a whale. I didn't wash the feet of Jesus with my hair.

- But, I was presented with a challenge

Rather than continue on the path I was on, and go to law school which was my trajectory coming out of high school, I started sensing that God wanted me to go to do something else with my life. That sense of my role change started to occur when I was selected as the *alternate* youth delegate to General Assembly, and since the first pick wasn't able to make it, I ended up being the one who got to go. What I thought was going to be a good "resume" booster, ended up being an opportunity to imagine my life going in a different direction - which ultimately felt like a choice I really didn't want to make. The law path was stable, would make good money and show success. Going into ministry seemed risky, and super-nerdy. I wasn't that kind of religious do-gooder. In fact, the churchy types always kept trying to reform me at my high school. It didn't make much sense to be having feelings that God was reaching out to me. What kind of weirdo God would want me as a representative?

- You see how quickly the excuses start to line up

There were many. I wasn't a do-gooder kid. I had already made a lot of what most "Christians" would view as mistakes in my life. My opinions didn't reflect the typical church going kind of opinions. In fact, years later, on Facebook, an old high school acquaintance

would ask me about my call to the pastorate saying that she thought I was an atheist in high school.

- And then an event happened...

Though I haven't always put so much stock in the "event" as the harbinger of the call story. I believe it's what one does about the challenge and the choice that matters so much more.

Not all call stories have a precise moment that can be pointed to as being touched by God. And yet, I can name one particular time where I simply gave up, and gave in to the idea that my life was going to be different. It was at that General Assembly meeting when I was up WAY too early to attend the peace-makers breakfast where William Sloane Coffin was slated to speak. I had heard from church folks I trusted that he was someone I needed to hear, that he would tell the kind of stories that would matter to a Christian more like me. But instead of making it to the breakfast, I got super angry about even being there, by mistake I could only presume as the second choice. I was mad at God, at myself, and especially mad at the other teenagers for seeming way too perfect. I couldn't believe that I actually was at some stupid religion convention, for a stupid national church, that I wasn't sure merited any investment for my life at all. So, I went and hid, not in the belly of the beast, but in a convention hall women's bathroom. I railed at God in my mind, dumping excuse after excuse, frustration after frustration. I told God in no uncertain terms that I was going to figure out a way to leave that meeting, that morning, on a train that would take butt home. But that's not what happened. After all my fussing seemed spent, there was a sense of, "Ok Kerra, Is that enough? You done now? Is the fighting over?" And my life began to turn toward a different point.

- It was only a beginning, but in that moment, I made that life changing choice

I didn't know at all how or what was going to unfold in my just then. It was less a choice about seminary or ministry than it was a choice to accept God's direction, to allow the Lord to be an influence in my life. No more running. No more hiding. No more fighting. I was going to have to listen more, to be directed by a calling that might not make sense in the larger culture. I wasn't following the script that had been laid out for me. And I certainly wasn't sure that I liked it. In fact, I was pretty sure I didn't. But I could no longer resist God and make my life work. The call got to me.

And now, there it is, that word, in the mission statement of our church, and in the mission statement of my life. You, me, we are *called*. It is an acknowledgement that ultimately God is inescapable, demanding, and very, very real in our lives, I'm sorry to say. That psalm that asks "Where can I go from your Spirit?" hits me in the gut every time because the answer is that we cannot really hide ourselves from God's call. And it's ultimately not a call to power, or prestige, or even being liked very much. It's a call to something bigger – a call that can only be realized after many, many years of continuing to say yes to original nudge, when I look back on the places it has taken me and the people I've met along the way. That choice to say yes to God comes back around often, sometimes to be said joyfully, and sometimes anxiously, and sometimes even through gritted teeth. It's the call that all genuine followers of Jesus wake up and hear for it is the difficult call to be led in all aspects of our lives by love.

One might erroneously think that Jeremiah's call was a call to power, after all he would be asked to speak God's truth to power as a prophet to the nations. But that message would be a message of destruction and overthrowing of nations and kingdoms – certainly not an enviable

task. Jeremiah was sent to call people back to love - the same task of all the prophetic voices.

Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet for a reason, and I find solidarity with that nickname given that my time hiding in the bathroom at General Assembly was filled with whole lot of hot and ugly tears.

Now what oddly led me to these insights about call was being incredibly frustrated with the second or third draft of this very sermon. I had spent two typical writing shifts deleting drafts that were not fit to preach. Writers block on Saturday morning doesn't always go over well when it's time I want to have with my family. So, I went upstairs to get a shower and hopefully find some perspective when I noticed that Josh Hayden, the pastor of First Baptist church down the road had posted a fitting quote from one of his favorite books by Henri Nouwen. In it Nouwen wrote about the tension that happens in every call story, that moment that turns one away from potential power, or comfort, or ordinariness, to choose the hard calling to love. He writes, "What makes the temptation to power so seemingly irresistible? Maybe its that power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life."

My God, that's it. That's the challenge. That's the choice. Thus, the reason for the excuses, and the need for some startling life event to wake us up to our purpose as followers of the God who makes love the ultimate priority. It's easier to pretend to be God than to love God. It's also easier to be frightened by God and choose the path of least resistance that to allow ourselves to be loved fully. Loving people, Nouwen is right, can be the worst. People are remarkably difficult. Being called to love the grit of life, the frustrations of humankind, that's a calling that will challenge you deeply every single time.

But as hard as it is, I don't think we've missed the mark, or given ourselves too difficult a task in saying that this is a church that has heard the call to love, and by that, I mean the call to love God, to hear the challenge, to love our neighbors no matter what, and to even love ourselves with deep kindness and a reverence for life. Oh boy, it's not the easy calling. It's not being the church that entertains you with a show and a motivational speaker or being the church where the path is step-by-step laid out for us to get into heaven. This love thing. It's messy. It means that the many, many reasons that we shouldn't do something will be easy to spot. The choice to show love might be expensive, or difficult, or impractical, or an affront to the neighbors. All those things about how wrong we are and how foolish we are could be said about us if we truly hear and respond to God's challenges.

You might be able to guess the kind of tales we will end up telling. We may do crazy things like recruit college students and interns with little life experience and trust them to fill important roles in our church. We may decide that we can have a diaper changing table visible right as you walk into our front door. We might choose to live by our values rather than "grow our church" according to market trends. We might not shush the toddlers who make too much noise, or reprimand the middle schoolers who seem distracted by everything. We might, actually might value wisdom, and age, and experience when the "church experts" tell us that we need more "young people" or else we're surely going to die. Love chooses differently. And accepting those challenges changes us, makes us different people.

You, as the people who come here and find kindred spirits in this place strike me as those who have been nudged, or maybe even pushed like I was down that path. That's why y'all are good at sensing what our interns will need, and why you are good at listening to them as they navigate learning about their skills and gifts. But it's not just the interns – you rub up against

each other like rocks in a rock tumbler – smoothing out the rough edges – letting the nature of that love become less pointy to the touch as though belonging here somehow makes the challenges less challenging, and rather more about the listening and doing what we’ve known is our human pathway all along.

Called to love. That’s what we are. And yes, it is the harder task. And though it may begin with excuses, and tears, and slap you upside the head opportunities, living into it is a remarkable way to live. So this month, we will be telling a bunch of call stories – because it ain’t just prophets and ministers who have them. It’s anyone who pays attention to God just long enough to get turned in that direction. That’s it. It’s a turning, a metanoia as Jesus would say, that gives us a glimpse of what’s possible with God. The answer is all things. All things are possible with God -but we genuinely are given a choice about it. We are called to love, but we aren’t forced into it. It is a groundbreaking “yes” that we must each answer for ourselves, in our own ways, and our own times, and for our own purposes, and it is a “yes” we will answer many times over. Amen.