

Jeremiah 1:4-10
Psalm 71:1-6
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Luke 4:21-30

Epiphany 4C
St. Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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God Calling

Last week, after hearing Jesus expound on what he'd been anointed for, I invited you to ponder the question "What has God anointed me for?" In our vestry meeting that followed last Sunday's service, we spent some time with that question, and the responses were stunning. Each one of us is anointed for something, called by God to use our particular gifts in ways that only we can use them. Each of us is called to Love, Seek and Serve God and God's beloveds in the ways that only we can. So, if you didn't spend any time with that question last week, I hope you will soon.

Jesus readily and willingly took the Father's call to heart and embodied it in that first sermon he preached – we got to hear it again today. It's the one sentence sermon he gave after reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah about setting the captives free, giving sight to the blind, proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor. Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. he said. Jesus was called to do those very things, and when he told the people about it they were amazed. Yep, last week, things were going pretty well for Jesus.

This week, we hear another call story, this one from the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah recalls the words he heard God speak to him as a boy, words I don't think he really wanted to hear.

"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."

"Oh my God - no no no no no! You are asking the wrong person. I wouldn't know what to say. I wouldn't know what to do. I don't have the words. I don't have the skills. I don't have the courage; I am only a boy."

"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. And don't be afraid of anyone, for I am with you to keep you safe."

Then God touched Jeremiah's mouth, and said, "Now I have put my words into your mouth. From this moment on you have the authority to speak for me to the nations: to destroy - and to build- to pluck up - and to plant."

Jeremiah did not want to be anointed for anything, he just wanted to be a boy, to be left alone and left to the less important things. But God won't let loose of him. No, he didn't have any big qualifications and he certainly didn't have a prestigious seminary degree... he was only a boy. But God promised to be with him, and then God touched his mouth and promised him that from that time forward he'd be given the powerful words he would need to speak God's truth to the powers that be. That's a nice promise, but it's still not a job I would want.

Calls from God can be scary. But they are also pretty impossible to ignore because God is so very persistent and will use almost anything to get our attention. It's probably no surprise to you, that God used tears to get me to hear my call. I used to cry in church – I still do that, don't I? One day a very long time ago, an assisting priest asked me why I was crying and was I ok? I have no idea what I told him, but a couple of weeks later he said to me "Karen, I know why you're crying." And immediately after telling me that, he said "Have you ever felt called to Holy Orders?" Well, quite honestly, I'd never really thought about that, HOWEVER, what came shooting right out of my mouth was "Yes." "Deacon or Priest?" he asked. "Priest." I said. And then I burst into tears. Again.

Some people think that "being called" has only to do with becoming a clergy person. While a call is certainly part of a clergy person's life, God's call is a part of everyone's life. Each one of us is called by God to recognize and acknowledge our God given gifts and to use them to glorify God and to bring God's kingdom to bear. Calls aren't always about our work, but they are always about our vocation. Vocation comes from the word vocare. Vocare means call.

Calls come in so many ways. An insistent thought that won't go away. Words on a page that ring in your ears long after you've closed the book. Wisdom from a stranger you never thought you'd listen to. A feeling in your gut you just can't shake. We don't all get called the way Jeremiah or Moses or Abraham did, we don't always hear God as a big booming voice. But I assure you, God is calling. What are you hearing?

Jesus knew he was called to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. And the very first thing he did in his public ministry – at least according to Luke – was to proclaim that's what he'd been called to and that's who he was. The people who heard him were amazed and delighted by the beautiful words he had spoken. That was last week. When we pick up this week, we hear more from Jesus and more from his listeners. "This is incredible," the people seemed to be saying. "This is our hometown boy, surely he will do more for us than what he did for the people in Capernaum, after all, this is his hometown, he's our guy!" And that's where things began to fall apart.

A prophet isn't welcome in his own hometown, Jesus said. I have to say I'm always a little uncomfortable with that bit of scripture! Saying a prophet isn't welcome in his or her own hometown might not make sense at first, but it turned out to be true. The people in Nazareth thought Jesus belonged to them, thought he owed them something special, thought they were entitled to more and better miracles because he was their hometown boy. But Jesus wasn't theirs. And quite frankly, they didn't want to hear his prophetic voice. As he began to tell the stories of the many ways God privileged the poor, the oppressed, the stranger, the outsider... the hometown crowd felt their own privilege slipping away. *Elijah was sent to a gentile widow, he told them, not to the widows of Israel. Elisha healed Naaman, the Syrian, rather than healing the countless lepers of Israel. God doesn't belong to you, I don't belong to you. The people out on the raggedy edges, the*

people who are “outsiders” are the privileged people in God’s world. And that made them want to kill him.

Does that seem extreme to you? Maybe at first, but it’s worth seriously considering what lengths people go to, to protect their place and their privilege. I wonder what lengths we’d go to, what lengths we do go to, to keep the prophetic voice at bay? You see, the prophet’s job, whether it’s Isaiah, Jeremiah, Jonah, or Jesus, is to shake us up, to shake up the way we see things, to turn our perfectly privileged worlds upside down. It’s why so many of those would-be prophets tried to wriggle out of the job. Jeremiah said, “I’m only a boy.” Moses said, “Get someone else, I stutter.” Jonah didn’t say a word, he just turned and ran away to Tarshish. It may not be easy listening to the prophetic voice, but being a prophet is a whole lot harder! You know how well it worked out for Jesus.

And still, in the end, they all said “yes” to God’s call. They probably didn’t feel particularly equipped, and we probably don’t either. I know I don’t. Oh, I had excellent seminary training, but it didn’t equip me for COVID protocols or burst pipes or ants on the altar or trying to be a pastor to a congregation I can’t even worship with. But God doesn’t promise us lessons and training. God simply says I will be with you, I will give you what you need. And we need to take that to heart. So, I’ll ask you again. What has God anointed you for?

Whether we are aware of God or not, God knows us and calls us by name. Even when we struggle with our own identities, God knows us. To God, we are not doctors or lawyers or students or preachers or teachers. We aren’t empty nesters or cancer patients or people who have been laid off. Our true identities aren’t found in our labels or positions or conditions. Our true identities are found in our deepest relationships. We are God’s beloveds, and God has called us by name, giving us gifts uniquely our own so that we can go out and do God’s good work in the world, blessing and loving the world back into wholeness. How will we do that this year? This community is alive with God’s Holy Spirit, and I believe with my whole heart that God calling us to great work that will help God’s kingdom come, not just in this place but far beyond our walls and even beyond our island. We only need to listen.

I’ll leave you with some of the most important words I know about call, from the Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor. *God does not call us once, but many times... there are calls to particular communities and calls to particular tasks within them... calls to seek God wherever God may be found. Sometimes those calls ring clear as bells and sometimes they are barely audible, but in any case we are not meant to hear them all by ourselves. It was part of God’s genius to incorporate us as one body, so that our ears have other ears, other eyes, minds, hearts and voices to help us interpret what we have heard. Together we can hear our calls, and together we can answer them, if only we will listen for the still, small voice that continues to speak to us in the language of our lives.*¹ There is good work to be done and I am so grateful to be doing God’s good work with you. Amen

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor - *The Preaching Life*