

GOD'S CALL FOR YOUR LIFE
a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, May 22,
based on Jeremiah 1:4-8, Mark 1:16-20

Today is Commencement day for Kent Roosevelt High School, and other area schools are following shortly. Graduating seniors will be heading out, trying to figure out what they should be doing in life. But no matter what your age or situation, there is always the question as to where your life should now be headed. Abraham was seventy five years old when God called him to head out to the Promised Land, which means that God does not have much of an idea of retirement.

Does God have a calling for your life? A common notion today is that we are just randomly here on earth with no particular purpose, and we have to simply make up our life journey as we go. But a very different picture emerges in the Bible, and we see it in our passage from Jeremiah, where God said, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you to be a prophet to the nations." (Jeremiah 1:5) God had a calling for Jeremiah, a life purpose and direction; and so God has a calling for each one of us.

But how do we discern God's call? The pattern that we see throughout the Bible is that God's calling comes to people in some way. For Samuel, the call to be a prophet came while he was lying in bed at night. For Gideon, the call to lead God's people came while he was threshing wheat. For Isaiah, the call to be a prophet came while he was worshipping in the temple. For Moses, the call came while he was tending sheep way out in the boondocks. For the disciples, Peter and Andrew and James and John, the call from Jesus came while they were at their fishing boats. In other words, the call from God can become apparent to us at all sorts of different points in life. What is clear, though, in every case, is that God has for each of us a particular life purpose, and that God will communicate that calling to us.

So finding our calling is not a matter of figuring things out on our own, but a matter of being receptive to how God is speaking to us and would lead us in life. But how might we expect that God's calling will become clear to us? When you read the Bible, you might get the impression that people, in one overwhelming moment, heard a voice of God booming out of a bush or the sky or wherever; but it is important to remember in this regard that Biblical call stories are highly condensed. In the Scripture, for example, that we heard from the gospel of Mark, we are told, concerning the call of Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, that "Jesus saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea ... and he said, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of people," and "immediately," we are told, "they left their nets and followed him." If this is all you read, you might think that Peter and Andrew got Jesus' call in one instant. But there was in fact much more to the story. We learn the rest of the story in other gospel accounts, where we find that Andrew first heard Jesus preaching, and then told Simon Peter about Jesus, who went and met Jesus. Then subsequently Simon Peter had an extended encounter with Jesus in his fishing

boat. All that occurred before the story about them answering Jesus' call to follow. So the call of Peter and Andrew was much more of a process than a moment. This likely will also be true for us—that God's calling to us may unfold over time.

Our experience of God's call may also include a good deal of personal wrestling, including wrestling with difficult times. Gideon, for example, received God's call while he was threshing wheat in a wine press, which he was doing because he was hiding out from foreign raiders who were trying to steal his grain. [*Gideon was beating out wheat in a wine press, to hide it from the Midianites. Judges 6:11*] Moses heard God's call after he had fled from Egypt and was spending his time in remote country trying to keep track of sheep. I have to wonder what Moses might have been thinking to himself: "Here I am. I was raised in the household of Pharaoh, born to Hebrew parents; is that what I am supposed to be doing—chasing through the wilderness after silly sheep? Then he heard God's call in a burning bush. It may be that a time of turbulence in life, along with a time of personal questioning, can make us especially receptive to hear God's call.

But even as we begin to sense God's guidance, there is another feature of God's call that may make it difficult for us finally to receive the call, and that is: God's call very often is bigger than what we were counting on. When God called Gideon, God called him to go out and lead the people of Israel to deliver their land from the oppression of those foreign invaders; and Gideon said, "Whoa! Not me. How can I deliver Israel? I am a nobody." [*Gideon said, How can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest, and I am the smallest. Judges 6:15*] When God called Moses, it was a call to bring the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, and Moses replied with an extensive series of excuses as to why he could not possibly do that. Likewise in our passage from Jeremiah, when God told Jeremiah that he was appointed to be a prophet, Jeremiah replied, "Ah, Lord God, I do not know how to speak. I am only a boy." (Jeremiah 1:6) If you want to hear God's call, get ready to be pulled out of your comfort zone.

But God's call also includes an assurance. God said to Gideon, "But I will be with you." (Judges 1:16) To Moses God said, "I will be with you, and will teach you what you are to say. (Exodus 4:12) And to Jeremiah God said, "Do not be afraid, for I am with you to deliver you." (Jeremiah 1:8) Along with God's call comes the assurance that God is with us, to guide and to empower us.

In every case, it is as people answer God's call that they find their purpose and their fulfillment in life. We know about Jeremiah and Isaiah and Moses and Gideon and Samuel and Peter today precisely because they lived out God's call.

So what is your calling? God's call can be in all sorts of directions. The Biblical people we have considered this morning were called to be prophets, preachers, military leaders, or political leaders, and the New Testament goes on to elaborate how people might be called to be teachers or administrators or healers or helpers, and the list goes on and on. Any sort of honorable career or volunteer service or life direction might be your calling, and our calling may shift depending on our point in life.

When I was serving for a couple of months in a United Methodist Church in Essen, Germany, I visited a woman in the parish who was about 90 years old, living by herself, but with assistance, in a tiny apartment. She was almost blind, and could walk only a short distance. What could be her calling at that point in life? She decided that her calling was to pray. She kept up-to-date on all the prayer concerns in the church, and she had an intensive program of daily prayer. Wherever we are in life, we can be receptive to how God is leading us right now.

But even as God's call for particular people may be in all sorts of directions, there is one aspect of God's call that is consistent for everyone—God calls us to something larger than ourselves. So often today, people's thinking about life direction is me-centered—people focus on how to make more money, or buy more stuff, or be more entertained. But the Biblical picture of God's call is that God always calls people beyond themselves—God calls us to share in God's purpose. One of the most inspiring aspects of being a part of the church is that we see people answering that call in countless ways. Whether people are working in the Tuesday Work Group or sharing in a church music ministry or teaching in the Sunday School or sharing in numerous other service capacities, people are moving beyond themselves to be a part of God's works.

And yet joining in God's purpose may at times mean traveling a difficult road. This was very much the case for Jeremiah. As a prophet, Jeremiah was called to preach to the political circumstances of his day, and the message that God gave him was one that people did not want to hear. The people of Judah were in a time of real difficulty and serious tension with other peoples around them. What they wanted to hear was that God loved their country more than the others and that God intended to exalt their land; or to put in in the language of today's political campaigning, the people of Judah expected Jeremiah to say that God wanted their country to be "great." But Jeremiah said, "There is none like the Lord. You are great, O God" (Jeremiah 10:6)—and Jeremiah called the people to look to the larger purposes of God. Jeremiah would not have done well in the polls. In fact, in Jerusalem, they threw him into an old cistern, and left him there to rot, until he was rescued by one of his few friends. Following God's call can be tough.

Likewise Peter, as he followed Jesus, experienced enormous challenges, so that toward the end of his life and ministry he wrote to believers in the early church who were likewise experiencing great trials, and he said, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ. Those who suffer in doing God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good." (I Peter 4:12-13, 19)

Perhaps here we see why many people today are inclined to ignore God's call—it is a lot easier. It is much easier to just do your own thing than to connect with the at-times demanding mission of the church—to join in a mission trip, or volunteer at a Trash and Treasure Sale, or give of your resources; and yet is it precisely as we connect ourselves to the larger calling of God that we find real meaning and value and joy in life.

Today God is calling us to join in God's purposes, to share in what God is doing in our time. May we be receptive to God's call; and even if the going gets difficult, may we live out the admonition of Peter—to commit ourselves to our faithful creator and continue to do good.