

Call and Consequences

Chris Currie

Jeremiah 1:4-10

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'Here I am Lord. Is it I Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go, Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart.' We hang a bit of romanticism on call stories or origin stories or personal faith narratives. Sometimes we prefer to revel in our call rather than the consequences of the call. Why is the call more fun than what follows? It reminds us of how it all began. It helps inspire or re-inspire us when our faith is flagging. A call reminds us that we are not self-made Christians, but God called us to do something worthwhile, impactful, and selfless with our lives. And to be fair, there are quite a few calls in scripture. Today we hear Jeremiah's call story in this first chapter in Jeremiah and next Sunday we will hear a similar call of the prophet Isaiah and his call by God in Isaiah chapter 6.

Once upon a time a call was something that only applied to monks and nuns and members of a holy order. Everyone else might have an occupation or a way to make a living, but not really a calling or vocation. The great legacy of the Protestant Reformation was the democratic conviction that every human being, whatever their station and whatever their gifts, had a God-given calling, and part of life should be spent on discovering that calling and using one's gifts to the best of one's ability and to the glory of God. We like to celebrate call, sing 'here I am Lord,' remember the first moment faith made sense or we experienced true Christian love for the first time or sensed the still small voice of God that holds us and never lets us go, because it is not just Jeremiah or disciples or members of a holy order or a select few who are called, but God's intention for humanity is that every human life know their calling and as a result flourish before God. One might make the case that so many of the challenges in our world are not simply matters of fighting poverty or working for racial reconciliation or socioeconomic challenges, but rather whether a human being has ever been loved and reminded that they have a calling and have been given gifts to put to use for this world and for God. Maybe the true threat we all face is not poverty or class division or political strife or high inflation, but the danger of living an uncalled life.

Our passage from Jeremiah is an account call by God before he was in the womb, already in God's mind and consecrated to be a prophet to the nations. Jeremiah, Jonah, Isaiah, Abraham, Paul, you, me, we all resist and say something like Jeremiah says, 'truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.' And God responds by acknowledging our inadequacies, our fears, our imperfections, and saying I know you aren't perfect or have it all together, I know you can't pretend that your life is not a hot mess, but I will be with you and will give you what you need to serve my purposes, to speak a word of the

Lord, to go where I send you, to speak to whom I send you. Maybe we like to remember these stories when life gets complicated or there are no easy choices or we adrift or in the trenches and need every ounce of inspiration, remembering, and purpose we can get. One of the most beautiful parts of a baptism, not to take anything away from the baptiz-ee, but one of the most beautiful parts of a baptism is when the whole congregation is asked to remember your baptism and to be grateful. Maybe that is what these call stories do for us...help us to remember who we are, whose we are, and that we have been given gifts by God to put to use for the sake of others in this world.

As beautiful, inspirational, and foundational as our call may be, where it takes us and what it demands from us may be even more moving and challenging and remarkable. On my desk I have three irreplaceable reminders to remind me who I am and what we are about as a Christian community. The first we have already touched upon...words from the French Reformed church baptismal liturgy that say, 'Little child, for you Jesus Christ came into the world, he did battle in the world, he suffered; for you he went through the agony of Gethsemane and the darkness of Calvary; for you he cried, 'It is fulfilled;' for you he triumphed over death...for you, and you, little child, do not yet know anything about this. But this is the statement of the apostle confirmed, 'We love God because he first loved us.' To be baptized is to be called; to be baptized is to be claimed by God; to be baptized is to be invited to live, as the spiritual sings, 'I'm gonna live so God can use me.' The second desk reminder is a charge and blessing that comes from the apostle Paul to live in the world with courage, hold onto what is good, return no one evil for evil, and the third is quotation from the book *Sisters of Sinai*. In a previous church the book was recommend by our church librarian and she was a retired schoolteacher who volunteered in the library but took the job more seriously than many paid employees. She was a voracious reader and a good stubborn tough love Presbyterian retired teacher who was never afraid to tell you what she thought, what you ought to be considered about, and definitely wanted to tell you what you should be reading. *Sisters of Sinai* was a book I made up my mind I was not going to read simply because she was always telling me how much I needed to read it. I put it off. And I refused to allow myself to be browbeaten into reading that book. But a funny thing happened. I wasn't the only one this librarian was evangelizing and hectoring about what books they should be reading. And the more people who relented and read the book couldn't stop talking about how great it was. Over time, the church librarian grew feeble and got sick and was unable to run the library from home, but she tried her best as long as she could. And finally, I relented, and decided I would read the book she thought was so important and good; and I did. And it was wonderful and the third quote that sits on my desk comes from the *Sisters of Sinai*, a story of two 19th century women who grew up in a small village in Scotland and became acclaimed scholars in biblical studies, basically self-taught and traveled to the most remote parts of the world looking for manuscripts and fragments of

the earliest scriptures which they could read whether in Arabic, Aramaic, Syriac, Greek, or Hebrew. Long story short here is the quotation that sits on my desk about Agnes and Margaret Smith: 'they imbibed a brand of what might be called 'fearless Presbyterianism,' which, because it was confident of the basics, was prepared to consider all opposition cool-headedly. Their own view on particular providence was evident in one of their traveling maxims: 'God knows the hour of our end.' For Agnes and Margert, this meant that there was no point in worrying about a storm at sea or getting lost in the desert, if this was the time at which God knew you would die, then you would; and if it was not, you would not. (Not all who traveled with them found this view reassuring.) Above all (and here is the part that makes their words have a permanent place on my desk), above all they took from their childhood formation the stoutly Presbyterian principle that one must *do* something worthwhile with one's life. Everyone, no matter how humble their station, had a God-given calling—it was just a question of finding out what that might be.'¹ Sometimes God speaks to us through a burning bush, sometimes God calls us through mountaintop encounter, sometimes God puts the words on our lips, sometimes God speaks to us through the routine and mystery of worship, and sometimes God even speaks to us through a stubborn willful church librarian.

In 1965, Donald Shriver, a religion professor who would later serve as President of Union Theological Seminary in New York City, published a book of sermons entitled the *Unsilent South*. These were sermons preached by Presbyterian ministers between 1955 and 1965 roughly, they were people who had been called like Jeremiah, who had been installed and sung 'Here I am, Lord,' and in many cases they had listened hard to the scriptural text and looked at the challenges in their community, and they were led to preach a nonsegregated gospel or participate in a local civil rights commission, or invite an African-American to worship at their church. The sermons preached, especially looking back, are not all that strident or forceful or imperative even; all in their own ways were encouraging their particular congregations to give such a kingdom consideration, to question their divisions, to seek a better way. And in many of the cases of these sermons, the end result was much the same as our passage from Luke today were Jesus is not only run out of his hometown, but almost run off a cliff. Hastily called session meetings were called, ministers and their families were asked to be gone by the end of the week, for once in their lives Presbyterian committees were moving swiftly, and all of this, Donald Shriver reminds us, was part and parcel the 'price that faithful people paid because in love they sought to bring home to their congregations the word of God which burned in their hearts.'²

¹ Janet Soskice, *Sisters of Sinai*, 15.

² Donald Shriver, 'Foreword,' *The Unsilent South*, p.9.

Consider your call, brothers and sisters, Paul declares to the Corinthians...it may not just be something you celebrate and sing about, it may lead you to make difficult decisions, it may lead you to speak up when it is uncomfortable and awkward, it may exact a personal cost. Several years ago, there was a program on public radio celebrating and educating the listening audience about the German baroque musical composer Georg Telemann. Normal people like you probably know all about Telemann but to a musical neanderthal like me, I had not heard of him. What was interesting in learning about his history was that at the time he was doing his thing and making his mark as a musician, his music and style were much more popular in his time than his more well-known contemporary, Johann Sebastian Bach. But as I was listening, I was thinking, wait a second, I know Bach and his chorales and many of his hymns that our in our hymnal, Bach is transcendent, Bach is even known by musical neophytes like me, Bach's music has traveled through the centuries and still inspires our faith, forms our souls, and speaks to our hearts. How could he not be the most popular in his time? How could he not be at the top of all the charts in 1725? I don't have the answers to those questions and maybe there is no answer other than the providence of God, but I wonder if being called is more like the longevity and transcendence of Bach than the momentary popular acclaim of Telemann. That we are called proclaim and live the gospel even when there are no immediate benefits, that we are called to pursue the common good even if our motives are questioned or the moment holds the very idea of a common good in contempt, that we are called to care about transcendent things even if in the moment they seem eccentric and out of whack. Jeremiah, Isaiah, the apostle Paul, and Jesus' own disciples all are here to remind us that are claimed to live a called life even when such claims are questioned and the uncalled life seems a lot more comfortable and undemanding and trendy. And in spite of it all, may the faithfulness of God shine through your call and cause you to flourish and live your life so that others may as well. Amen.