

## HERE I AM, LORD

### Jeremiah 1:4-10

Father Murphy walked into a pub and said to the first man he met, "Do you want to go to heaven?" The man said, "I do, Father." The priest said, "Leave this pub right now!" He then approached a second man. "Do you want to get to heaven?" "Certainly, Father," was the man's reply. "Then leave this den of Satan!" said the priest. Father Murphy then walked up to O'Toole and asked, "Do you want to go to heaven?" O'Toole replied, "No, I don't, Father." The priest looked him right in the eye and said, "You mean to tell me that when you die you don't want to go to heaven?" O'Toole smiled and said, "Oh, when I die. Yes, Father. I thought you were getting a group together to go right now."

God calling! There is a devotional book by this name which records daily messages for living God gave to two women. They have elected to remain anonymous and to be called "Two Listeners." But the claim which they make is an astonishing one; that their message has been given to them, today, here in England, by the Living Christ Himself." First published in 1935, *God Calling*, has become a Christian classic and one I used early in my Christian walk. The key to recognizing Godly communication is that messages from God never run contrary to God's Word.

The idea or thought that mere human beings like you and I could actually "hear" the voice of God often causes people to look askance at the speaker. People are more likely to raise their eyebrows and nudge one another than believe that God is in the business of audibly speaking to human beings. I don't see this necessarily as negative – there are plenty of people who claimed to "hear" the voice of God who led people astray and some even to their death - David Koresh and Jim Jones, are probably two names with which we are most familiar.

Then there are people who heard God's voice in the very word of God. There are several key examples with which I am guessing most here will recognize. Abram was hanging out in Haran when he heard a voice saying to him, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). Moses was tending sheep in the middle of the desert when he heard a voice coming from a burning bush (Exodus 3:1-15). Samuel was a little boy sleeping on a cot in the temple when he heard a voice calling his name (1 Samuel 3:1-18). Isaiah was in the temple when he heard the Lord say, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" (Isaiah 6:8). Elijah was in the cleft of a mountain when he heard the "still small voice", and when he heard God say to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:12-13). And then there's this week's text, where a boy named Jeremiah hears a voice and decides to get interactive with it. The voice, of course, is the voice of God. But we have to wonder how each of these biblical heroes heard it and, perhaps even more importantly, what made them answer.

Kids today might have an increasingly tough time differentiating between a real voice and a computer-generated one. Think about it, we have Siri and Alexa, and we have the voices of our smart phone generated directions. But Jeremiah knew right away that the voice he was hearing

was the Lord's. How did he know, and how do we know, when we're hearing the voice of God? Jeremiah's story offers some clues. (Homiletics, 2016).

For starters, God's voice is best heard in the context of a community of faith. (vv. 1-3) Jeremiah grew up within a priestly community, Jeremiah would have known the stories about Abraham, Moses, Samuel and so many others who had heard God's call. He would have been schooled in regular prayer and would have witnessed the people of his village poring over sacred texts to determine God's will and way for their lives. The voice of God thus came to Jeremiah, not out of the blue, but in the context of a community devoted to God; a community where people discerned God's voice together.

In a world where technology tends to isolate people, and where a kid can have hours of conversations with a doll instead of with friends or family, we need to remember that we are wired to hear God's voice best within community. It's in community that we can check the inner stirrings of our hearts with others who can help us discern the voice of God through Scripture, worship and prayer. Regular connection to Christian community is a key to making sure that the voice we're hearing is actually God's, and not simply an advertisement for our own desires. This cannot be emphasized enough. God would never instruct you or I to act contrary to God's written word. And, God's calling on a person must always be confirmed in the midst of solid Christian community.

These are some of the critical things we need to consider when seeking the will of God: We don't know exactly "how" God's call came to Jeremiah, whether it was a dream or perhaps an inner voice or maybe during a time of prayer. But, like Moses and Samuel before him, Jeremiah decides to test the voice by entering into conversation with it, even pushing back against it. God told Jeremiah that he had been appointed to a prophetic mission before he was even born (v. 5). Having been schooled in the story of Moses, Jeremiah raises a conversational objection. "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy!"

God knows Jeremiah, but Jeremiah also knows himself and what being "a prophet to the nations" will entail. By pushing back in conversation, Jeremiah can sort out whether his call is something coming from within himself, which could be easily dismissed, or whether this was coming from God — a call that could not be discounted quite so fast.

It's an interesting pattern in the Bible — those who are the most powerfully used by God are those who take the time to test God's call with a conversation. Jeremiah's response to God, "Ah, Lord God" is language that usually preceded a prayer in the form of lament or complaint. The Bible reveals a lot of these kinds of conversational prayers; the Psalms are full of them, as are the stories of biblical heroes including Jesus who has his own pushback conversation with God in Gethsemane. (Homiletics, 2016).

I have had my own "pushback" conversations with God. The most striking one occurred at the time of my Breast cancer diagnosis. I had been waiting for the results of my core needle biopsy,

it was less than a week of waiting, but those days seemed like a life time. In the waiting, I had heard all the glowing reports from other women who had this procedure and the biopsy came back negative. It felt like everyone and anyone seemed to have a sister, friend, cousin, mother who had had this done and came away free and clear. Like any life changing event, I remember clearly where I was when I received the results of my biopsy. I was at seminary when I received a message to call the hospital. Holding my breath, I made the call and heard the last thing I wanted to hear, “Your biopsy came back positive for DCIS – ductal carcinoma in situ. We have made an appointment for you with a surg.....” The rest of the conversation sounded a lot like Charlie Brown’s teacher, blah, blah, blah. Everything around me began moving in slow motion and I had to remind myself to breathe.

On my way home, coming over Afton Mountain, I had my pushback conversation with God. Literally shaking my fist at God, I shouted, “Why? Why didn’t I get a negative diagnosis?? How come all these other women did and I did not??” I paused to catch my breath, and in the pause, God spoke to me, “You never asked.” My retort (still shaking my fist.) Yes. I. Did. I asked for a clean bill of health! And God replied, “And...you will get it!” These five words have forever changed my prayer life.

Indeed, it seems like God invites this kind of conversation, even if God will always have the last word! We sometimes forget that prayer is a two-way street and that God doesn't just give us a series of commands. Plenty of people have claimed to have been ordered by God to do something but failed to enter into a conversation with God to determine whose voice they were actually hearing. A computer server can pump out sentences in response to a person's voice, but it can never actually know the heart of a person, his fears or her feelings. God allows us to bring those fears and feelings to the table when we converse with the divine. Yes, God wants our obedience, but it seems that God desires that obedience to emerge out of a deep relationship rather than out of mere obligation.

Regular prayer is a running conversation with God that allows us to "test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (1 John 4:1). God invites us, both individually and collectively, to test the spirits in prayer and in fellowship with other Christians, so that we can hear God's voice clearly.

Jeremiah responds to God with a readymade, albeit very accurate reason why God should not choose him! “Ah, Lord God,” I said, “I don’t know how to speak because I’m only a child.” (v. 6) And God’s response is to tell Jeremiah he will give him the words he needs. And this is exactly how God works. God will never call a person to a certain task without giving them the necessary tools and resources to complete the task. Whatever God calls people to is the thing he intends to empower them to accomplish. This means we aren’t alone in our calling. We aren’t solely responsible for the results of what we are called to. We don’t claim the credit for those results. We find God at work around us and join him in what he might do through us. That is the partnership of our calling.

So what, Pastor Tizzy? What exactly does this passage from Jeremiah have to do with us, Marquis Memorial UMC? What does this have to do with me personally?? Here is what I think. I think, no I believe in the good work God has begun in each of you here. I believe God will continue to use you and this church for God's glory. It is true, this won't come without cost. Without a cost to you personally and without a cost to the church. The late Henri Nouwen says this best in his book, "The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey Through Anguish to Freedom" As you see more clearly that your vocation is to be a witness to God's love in this world, and, as you become more determined to live out that vocation, the attacks of the enemy will increase. You will hear voices saying, "You are worthless, you have nothing to offer, you are unattractive, undesirable, unlovable." The more you sense God's call, the more you will discover in your own soul the cosmic battle between God and Satan. Do not be afraid. Keep deepening your conviction that God's love for you is enough, that you are in safe hands, and that you are being guided every step of the way. Don't be surprised by the demonic attacks. They will increase, but as you face them without fear, you will discover that they are powerless. And these attacks can take on some very real practical applications. A furnace may fail, building codes may get in the way of establishing a new ministry. What is important is to keep clinging to the real, lasting and unambiguous love of Jesus. Whenever you doubt that love, return to your inner spiritual home and listen there to love's voice. Only when you know in your deepest being that you are intimately loved can you face the dark voices of the enemy, without being seduced by them. Only when your roots are deep can your fruits be abundant.

Cling to this. Continue to be willing to take those steps of faith where God calls you and me to something greater than we could ever imagine. "Do not say, 'I am only a boy,'" as Jeremiah said to God. (Jeremiah 1:7). That line, "But I am only...", is one of the saddest statements in the English language — and not just because it's a convenient excuse. It's a sad statement because of what it says about the one who utters it. People who say such a thing in response to what could just be a call from God aren't just blowing off their responsibilities as Christian disciples. They're not muttering under their breath, "I don't want to do that; I just need a good excuse to get out of it!" They really, truly believe they don't have what it takes, that there's been some sort of cosmic mix-up and God's call has been delivered to the wrong address. What great things could we accomplish in this world if only we could win this battle within — the battle for self-confidence! "But I am only..." is a self-destructive mantra we carry around inside our heads, chanting it over and over again, until it becomes so familiar, we believe it to be true. If only we could learn to respond in a different way, saying, Here I am Lord, send me! This. This. Is. Who. We. Are!" In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.