

## Expecting a Call

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:14-30

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, (Jan. 30) 2022

Kyle Childress

*The sort of call I am talking about is a summons from the everyday world, one that stirs your sympathy and imagination and compels you to act.*

- Scott Russell Sanders

When I hear these stories from Jeremiah and Luke that we just heard read this morning I'm always asking, "What kind of community, what kind of church, does it take to raise prophets like Jeremiah and Jesus?" Jeremiah is called as a youth "to pluck up and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, and to build and to plant." And Jesus speaks to his hometown synagogue about how God has used outsiders to do his work. The result is that his hometown people, folks who have known him since he was a toddler, are so outraged that they run him out of town.

How are people like that called? How do you raise someone with not only the courage to stand up, but with the wisdom to know what to stand up about?

Let there be no doubt that prophets, indeed, Christians are not called out of nothing. They are called out of a community – a community that prepares and trains them, has expectations of them, and supports and prays for them.

I was raised in the First Baptist Church of Stamford, Texas – a good, solid Baptist church with a fine pastor. I was raised knowing that God calls. It was

simply something that happens. God calls prophets, preachers, missionaries, schoolteachers, lawyers, doctors, writers, farmers, artists, people who know how to work with money for the common good, musicians, and on and on. In fact, God even calls us to be Christian. Did you know that?

When we come forward for baptism committing our lives to Christ and to Christ's body, the church, or when we are simply joining the church, we are not so much making choices – which is our modern, consumeristic way of thinking – as much as we are responding to the call of God. This is important to remember that we always respond to God's initiative. God's grace and God's call extends to us, and our job is to respond.

God calls, God speaks, sometimes loudly and dramatically, other times, perhaps most of the time, quietly. Writer Scott Russell Sanders says that our calling might come through “something as ordinary as the cry of the baby or the plea of a friend who needs comforting.” He goes on, “I mean the way a few words spoken to you, or a passage read in a book can set you in a new direction. I mean the entreaty that beckons from the eyes of a child with a bruised face. I mean the appeal that protesters hear from the forests, mountains, and rivers they defend against chain saws, dynamite, and dams. The sort of call I am talking about is a summons from the everyday world, one that stirs your sympathy and imagination and compels you to act” (Scott Russell Sanders, *The Way of Imagination*, p.198-199).

We can say “no” or we can say, “yes” to God's call. Part of our role as the church is to help one another, help children and young people, learn to listen for

God's call, to learn to discern it and respond to it.

Now the call of God is very personal. But it is not private. In other words, I might sense that God is calling me to be a Christian, or calling me to some kind of service, but my response is to let the community know about it. It is not uncommon to stand up and give an accounting, a testimony of one's call. The congregation has the responsibility of listening and prayerfully considering if, indeed, there is evidence of the person's call. More common nowadays, is if one of us senses God's call in our lives, we get together with one or two people in the congregation we respect and trust. They listen to us, they pray for us, and they respond to us. And all of this takes time and patience.

That is partly why older generations paid attention to the names we gave a child. A name was not simply a nice label. A name said something of "Who I want this child to become." It said, "I have a vision for this person."

The great seventeenth century English poet and pastor George Herbert said that he would "admit no vain or idle names" at a child's baptism. Precisely because names are evocative. We grow into our names. We grow into what we are called. We grow into our callings.

William Faulkner has a child named in one of his novels, "Montgomery Ward Snopes." It is a perfect name for a child being trained to be a successful consumer. Nowadays, we would name them, "Wal-Mart Snopes" or "Amazon Snopes."

Being called to be a Christ follower, called to be prophetic, called to ministry or missions or service takes a community where we expect calls. Conservative and Fundamentalist churches have their rigid Bibles and pastors-with-all-of-the-power, which does not leave much room for God to reach down and grab some unsuspecting person by the nape of the neck and thrust her or him into service and ministry, plucking up and tearing down, building and planting.

At the same time, liberal and progressive churches, like us, might not be so sure that it is God calling. Might it not be hormones or an overly active imagination or even some sort of psychosis?

I was only nine or ten when, B. J., one of our hometown heroes came home from Vietnam. He had lived two doors down from me, was a star on the high school football team, and had been in my father's Sunday School class before going off to Vietnam to fly helicopters. He came back with one leg and a message. God told him, he said, that the war was wrong and that our church, our town, and our country needed to change about racism. He was never given the opportunity to stand in the pulpit and testify so most of his words were shared in casual conversations in the church parking lot and around the dinner table. He talked about getting back to farming with his father, how the Bulldogs – the high school team – were doing, and other standard fare. But he was clear that the war was wrong and so was racism. Even though his comments were low-key and casual, it became the talk of the church and of the town. Mostly, people talked about how Vietnam had messed up his head. One Sunday after church, I overheard my parents talking about B.J. They agreed that perhaps the boy had some mental problems from Vietnam, but that didn't mean that what he said was wrong.

Though B. J. never considered himself a prophet, he was. He did consider himself a Christian. And he certainly was that. Our congregation didn't know what to do with him, although they had raised him, taught him the Bible stories, taught him that God calls and God speaks, and that his job was to listen and "to trust and obey, for there's no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey."

Luke tells us that Jesus was back in his hometown synagogue. Those people in the congregation that day had raised him, taught him Bible stories, taught him that God calls, and God speaks, and that his job was to "trust and obey," so they were shocked when Jesus said that God worked through the widow at Zarephath, and that God used Syrian lepers to do his will. They had groomed Jesus to be a successful rabbi with a large following. Preaching like that ruined it all. He could have been somebody. But he threw it all away; his career took a downturn and never recovered. In fact, he ended up being crucified on a Roman cross. "My goodness, what a shame; we all thought he was going to amount to something."

You've heard me say many times of the advice given to me years ago by an old social activist who said that if you take Jesus seriously and faithfully seek to live out the life of a Christ follower, "You had better look good on wood because that is where you will end up."

So when I gaze upon you and watch the children and youth, as we teach that God speaks and God calls us to sacrificial service, to be peacemakers in a world of war and violence, to redeem the earth, to serve the needy, heal the sick, and proclaim liberty to the captives, I remember the activists words and cringe with

fear. Do I want you to be like Jeremiah and Jesus? Do we want to form our children and youth, so they'll be faithful Christians, prophets who tell us the truth even when we don't like it?

Now, I know that most of the time it is not so dramatic and extreme. "Surely, Kyle, we can raise our kids to be nice citizens and polite, middle-class Christians." Well, the answer to that is first, that is not what God calls us to do and be. We are not called by the God we know in Jesus to be nice citizens. We are called to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ. Sometimes that means there is no conflict, and we go on about our business serving, caring, forgiving, and healing. But every once in awhile, it can cause trouble. Our job is not to pick and choose when or where we're nice or in trouble – our calling is to be like Christ and let the chips fall where they may.

Second thing about that – is it's not up to us how all of this comes out. When my dad, and the other people in my hometown church taught B. J. the Bible, took him out in the hall when he was an ornery seventh-grade boy and gave him a talking to about his behavior, which my dad did about every two or three weeks, told him about Christ and God's call to be a Christian, which resulted in baptism, and so on – no one knew where it would lead. Sure, everyone assumed he would come back from Vietnam and return to the farm with his father – which he did. They didn't know he would remember the Bible and the call of Christ in ways they didn't anticipate.

My old teacher, Fred Craddock, says that he was talking to a college student one day. She said to him, "I was a failure in my classes; I never had any dates; and

I didn't have as much money as the other students. I was so lonely and depressed and homesick and failing. One Sunday afternoon," she said, "I went to the river near the campus. I had climbed up on the rail and was looking into the dark water below. For some reason or another I thought of the line, 'Cast all of your cares upon him for he cares for you.'" She said, "I stepped back, and here I am."

Dr. Craddock said, "Where did you learn that line?"

She said, "I don't know."

"Do you go to church?"

"No . . . Well, when I visited my grandmother in the summers, we went to Sunday School and church."

Dr. Craddock said, "Ah . . ."

We never know where or what will happen with our training and formation. We never know how one conversation with a young person or child might make a difference years later. Or how teaching one Sunday School lesson can change a life.

Joe Richardson says that growing up as a boy, whenever they were called upon in Sunday School to recite Scripture, he and his friends would quote John 11: 35, "Jesus wept." It is the shortest verse in the Bible. Years later, when Joe and Marilyn's daughter, Carin, had a brain tumor and they didn't know if she would

live or die, Joe said that verse, “Jesus wept” kept coming back to him and was a source of great comfort. That little verse helped pull Joe through.

We never know do we? God speaks and God calls us. Sometimes it sustains us and comforts us. Sometimes it might save our life. Sometimes it will thrust us into trouble and controversy because we stood up and told the truth.

Nancy Sehested is one of the greatest preachers I know and has been here a couple of times. Nancy was among the early pioneer women preachers in Southern Baptist life. She had a tough row to hoe. People have asked her over the years why she chose to preach? She says, “Chose? You think I chose this? You think I chose to have people call me names and denounce me? I didn’t choose this! I was called.” Nancy’s father was a Baptist preacher, and her grandfather was a Baptist preacher. She said that it was quite common in church and around the family dinner table to speak of God’s call. Nobody said that God called only men.

God calls us to pluck up and tear down, build and plant. What we are doing is planting seeds with children and youth. In some of you, seeds are being planted as well. Where will it lead? We don’t know. We just learn to listen and pay attention to God’s call.

I remember years ago the first time Nancy Sehested was here preaching and we had picketers from Rev. Otwell out on the street protesting our having a woman preach. One of our youth, Megan Choate went out to offer the protestors a cup of water in Jesus’ name, because that is what she learned in Sunday School. She offered them a cup of water and invited them into the worship service. They



accepted the water but declined the invitation.

I remember Mollie Garrigan turning in her track team uniform and choosing instead to go with the youth on a mini-mission trip when she was a seventh grader. And Sydney Watson making a similar choice by declining to play soccer so she could go on a church mission trip.

I remember five-year-old Callie Childress taking a cup of coffee in Jesus' name to an old, grizzled and embittered homeless man at the Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth Agape Meal and the man looking up to see who brought the cup of coffee and his face lighting up as he said, "Thank you! Darling!"

Or the time, about 20 years ago when Jessica Choate put up the sign out front on Appleby Sand Road that said, "War Is Not the Answer," which caused our neighbor to have a hissy fit, and our church phone to ring off the hook.

Now, I know, I know! None of these things are like Jesus being run out of town or ending up on a cross. And they are not like Jeremiah. But Christians and prophets all start somewhere.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.