

## I Wish the Preacher Would Talk About... *How God Calls*

Jeremiah 1:4-10

August 11, 2024

How do you recognize the voice of God? How can you know—really know, know for certain—when God is leading you in a new direction? When you are inundated by a cacophony of conflicting cries, how do you listen for that one clear strain, the whispers of the Spirit? *How does God call?*

The question feels particularly urgent in consequential moments of our lives. Those life-defining moments. Those moments of deepest and broadest significance. Moments when big decisions must be made. Have I chosen the right profession? Am I preparing for the right vocation? With whom should I choose to spend my life? How should I spend my resources? How do I respond to a friend in crisis, a friend in despair, a friend in need? Whom should we choose as our leaders? Which values will have highest priority in our lives? Why did God put me on this planet?

The good news is that our sacred scriptures are filled with stories of divine call and human response. When you reflect on these narratives, an interesting pattern begins to emerge. Take Jeremiah for example. The word of the Lord comes to him entirely unannounced and without warning. God says before he was even born, he had been called by God as a prophet. Later at the end of the chapter, as the encounter ends, he is given a pair of promises. These two. Number One: "The people will fight you..." Number Two: "*But* they won't prevail." That's cold comfort if you ask me.

Why will they fight him for following God's call? Because the prophetic word Jeremiah must deliver is a hard word. It is a word of judgment, and the people who must hear that word are *his* people. Jeremiah's aunts and uncles, neighbors and teachers. Jeremiah will proclaim God's disappointment with all who

call themselves righteous but leave their faith at the doors of the sanctuary. Yes, they are ostentatious in worship but fail to listen and live the truth of their performance. Jeremiah must tell them they are moving too quickly down the wrong path, and they are headed into exile in Babylon.

And here comes the pattern. Jeremiah resists God's call. We see it over and over again in scripture. Like Moses and Jonah, Isaiah and, yes, some of you, this young man attempts to reject the call of God.

Too hard. Too scary. Not me. Not now.

In Jeremiah's case, his novel excuse is that he is too young to speak for God. Literally, Jeremiah says, "God, I am only a child." For his part, Moses memorably rejects God's call *five* times when he is spoken to from the burning bush. He uses every excuse in the book. He brings up his lack of oratorical skill, the fact that he has no credibility among his people. And his final protest is my favorite one. It is the most desperate and the most refreshingly direct. Moses says, "O Lord, please send someone else." He even has a candidate in mind: Aaron.

Have you ever found yourself in such a spot? Questioning a divine call. Wondering if the voice you hear is in fact the voice of God. Or perhaps just asking to be left alone or begging God to send someone in your place.

Too hard. Too scary. Not me. Not now.

But here's the thing. When it comes to the call of God, there is no one else. No other person on the planet possesses your unique combination of gifts. No one else in the history of humanity has fit the puzzle in the

spot God designed for you. In my experience, despite our attempts at resistance, God's pursuit is patiently persistent, and there is no substitute for *you*.

This can be comforting when making those significant, life-altering decisions, to know that there is a spot designed for you. But we are still left with the questions: How do we know for certain? How do we recognize God's voice?

And when we consider the question of God's call to Jeremiah, we might wonder if his is a model for us. Yes, God pursues Jeremiah before this young man has a chance to consider other options, or call his parents for advice, or read the fine print in the contract. Yes, he is given work that will be difficult, demanding. It will ask so much of this young man. But there is, with the call, a simple assurance. It flies by so quickly in the text you may have missed it altogether. It comes in verse eight. It arrives in the voice of God. It is this: "Do not be afraid. I am with you." That's all. And for Jeremiah, that is everything. All he needs to hear. Confident in God's companionship, he embarks on this new journey. One of my friends, reflecting on this passage, wrote, "the presence of God...renders every perceived inadequacy irrelevant." God believes in you.

This, it seems to me, is *the* crucial step in recognizing and responding to God's call. We are often so attuned to our weaknesses. We are so captive to the voices telling us what we cannot do that we miss the awesome power of God at work within us.

Ultimately it is less about our ability than God's presence, which renders every perceived inadequacy irrelevant. Time and again, God must overcome the self-doubt that holds us back.

My favorite insight on the question of call comes from the mystic and theologian Howard Thurman, who gave us this wisdom: "Do not ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

I believe this is the purpose for which each one of us was created: to come alive. To discover what it is that brings you an undeniable sense of purpose and passion, and then pursue it with everything you have. The promise of God is not that following God's voice will lead to a simple, easy, straightforward life without suffering or pain or struggle. It is only this: *do not be afraid. I will be with you. Let go of your insecurities. Release your hesitation. Run toward that which brings you to life.*

Over the past couple of weeks, I've been so inspired by the stories of these Olympic athletes who have overcome incredible adversity, drowned out the voice of cynicism, and persevered toward audacious goals. I think you can see it in their eyes and hear it in their voices what life abundant looks like.

So, this is no rhetorical question. What makes you come alive? Where have you felt the subtle, persistent tug of the Holy Spirit? Where do you find that sense of purpose in that cacophony of cries? When do you hear in your heart the clear strain, the whisper of the spirit saying, "This! This is it. *This* is it"? Whatever it is, you were meant to follow that passion with faith and courage. God believes in you.

But wait, there's more. As you follow, never forget this: this call on your life is about *more* than your life. You will discover your deepest joy when you pursue a purpose greater than your own success. I've met more than a few souls over the years whose tireless pursuit of achievement, accomplishment, accolade, and abundance have left them feeling empty at the core. Sensing that there must be something more than this.

I'm not sure exactly why, but I keep hearing the same ad on all of my favorite podcasts. They must assume that this ad appeals directly to people like me who listen to these kinds of podcasts. I can't even recall what it is that the ad is promoting, but the opening line is this: "we all deserve to live happier and more productive lives." Now this is certainly one measure for our decision-making. "We *deserve* happiness. We *deserve* productivity.

And therefore, we should make choices that increase those values, beginning of course with the purchase of the product being advertised.”

Perhaps you can sense in the tone of my voice that I am utterly unconvinced. Our decisions are about more than our happiness and productivity. We, who spend a little time here together each week, must use a different standard of discernment and decision-making. I recently heard an interview with an author and influencer whose many books on self-improvement and personal empowerment have sold literally millions of copies. And at one point in the conversation, the author talks about her decision to leave organized religion after writing for many years about its positive impact on her life. Here’s how she summarizes her rationale, “I didn’t want anyone to tell me what to do with my life anymore.” Now what struck me about this response was *not* the rationale. The truth is I’ve heard it hundreds of times—there is nothing innovative about leaving church in pursuit of your perceived absolute freedom. What struck me in this case was how naïve it is to assume that faith makes the only claim of such authority over our lives. And this from someone who calls herself an *influencer*! It’s precisely what she’s trying to do! Help people decide how to live their lives. I found myself thinking, *at least religion is honest about its influencing.*

Yes, we want to tell you what to do with your life because we believe that God cares about what you do with your life. We believe that there are better and worse ways to live. We believe that the decision is *not* whether you will choose to be shaped or left unshaped, but rather which voices you will allow to shape you.

The practice of listening for the call of God means letting our lives be shaped by the values of faith and by this community that surrounds and supports us. It means trusting that there is deeper joy in following God’s voice than blazing your own path. It means believing that life can be about so much more than personal advancement or acquisition.

I close with a personal story. When I decided to go to seminary, I was profoundly influenced by a letter which was written to me on May 1, 2000, when I was seventeen years old. I had just preached my very first sermon on Youth Sunday at Vandalia Presbyterian Church in Greensboro, North Carolina. This note still moves me by what the influencer says and what he does not say. In my father’s nearly illegible handwriting, the note reads:

*Dear Chris,*  
*I am so very proud of you in so many ways. I hope you know that. I was so proud of you on Sunday. You spoke God’s word from your heart—expressing your faith... Chris, I have never—and will never—“push” one of my children into ministry. I heard again after church the comments of, “Chris should be a minister.” I believe you have the gifts to do so, but that may not be the direction God is calling you. I pray that you will always listen to God’s leading—as I believe you have been doing. Again, your mother and I are deeply proud of you.*  
*Love, Dad*

A quarter century later, I remain persuaded that God speaks, that God calls, that God’s voice asks us to come alive to something far greater than we could imagine on our own. In the end, all we have are these precious lives, this priceless gift offered for a fleeting moment.

And, we have a choice to make. We can allow our inadequacies to hold us back. We can invest our time in mountains of things that will only rust and fade away. Or we can listen for the voice of God and run after abundant life. It’s a choice we make every day.

For God’s sake, don’t miss your call.

For all our sake, don’t waste your life. Amen.