

You've Got a Call

21st Weekend in Kingdomtide – October 8/9, 2005

Sermon Background Study

[God gives Jeremiah his vocation at a very early age!]

Jeremiah 1:4-8 (NRSV)

⁴Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,

⁵“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

⁶Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know
how to speak, for I am only a boy.”

⁷But the LORD said to me,

“Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’;
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you.

⁸Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,
says the LORD.

Some risk-taking is grounded in faith and some of it is grounded in foolishness. When we work outward from our vocation, when we “honor our raw materials,” we are much more likely to take wise risks and make smart decisions. Other Christians we trust can help us in this. Small groups are a great way to get help us hear God’s call, discern God’s will, and make wise decisions.

We began this series with the story of Peter stepping out of a boat so that he might walk on the water toward his Lord. Peter had to take a risk, he had to do what seemed reckless and foolish. Who steps out of a boat in the middle of a rough sea!? Last week, we considered Naaman, who took big risks in his desire to cure a horrible disease. Being faithful is inherently risky. As the writer of Hebrews so aptly put it, “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (11:1). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls his disciples to a life oriented by God’s wisdom, not the world’s. Growing as disciples means taking risks, big and small. But what kinds of risks? All of the risks presented to us? Surely not. We all know that some risk-taking is wise and other risk-taking is just plain foolish. But how can we tell which is which? How can we know when God wants us to step out of the boat and when he wants us to stay in?

Vocation

Let’s begin with the word. *Vocation* is a direct descendent of the Latin, *vocatio*, meaning “summons” and the French, *vocare*, meaning “to call.” We often use vocation to mean our occupation, what it is that employs us full-time. We even contrast it with avocation, meaning some sort of hobby or interest – too often something we enjoy doing a lot more than our vocation! But we don’t usually link “vocation” and “calling.” Sometimes, we speak of someone having a calling when we see their passion for an occupation that seems so perfect for them. But usually, we reserve the idea of a “calling” for pastors and others who are “called” by God into ministry, like Jeremiah. But limiting our use of “vocation” is a mistake.

Jeremiah

More than 600 years before Jesus, the southern kingdom of Judah and its capital Jerusalem fell under increasing pressure and threat from the Babylonians and their king, Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah was a prophet, called by God before his birth, during these final years of the kingdom’s life.

We know more about Jeremiah and his life than any of the other writing prophets because he tells us much of his own story in his prophetic messages. Jeremiah was from Anathoth, a small town about two miles north of Jerusalem in the lands of the tribe of Benjamin. He prophesied from about 627BC to beyond the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. His ministry began during the reign of King Josiah. Josiah’s successors rebelled against Babylonia, to whom Judah was a vassal state. Jeremiah believed that Babylonia was God’s instrument of judgment upon Judah and that Judah’s kings should accept the ‘yoke’ of Babylon (Jeremiah 27). He was branded a traitor and was imprisoned. A tribal priest himself, Jeremiah preached hard words against the temple establishment. Centuries later, Jesus would invoke the words and actions of Jeremiah in his own confrontation with the temple priests.

After the burning of Jerusalem, Jeremiah went into exile like thousands of other Jews. Nonetheless, during and after the final siege of Jerusalem, Jeremiah brought words of comfort and hope, promising a day when Israel would be restored and God’s covenant would not be written on tablets of stone but upon his people’s hearts (Jeremiah 30-33).

Jeremiah was the greatest spiritual personality among God’s people during a time of great chaos and decline. Though by temperament he was gentle and compassionate, Jeremiah never softened his warnings about the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the Jews. He brought them God’s call to stay faithful to God and his law, rather than trust in the outward trappings of the temple system. And during the exile, he brought them words of comfort about the restoration of Israel and the renewal of the people of God.

The key to grasping the Biblical understanding of vocation is to realize that, as Mark Roberts recently wrote in a series on vocation,¹ “You don't get a vocation without someone doing the ‘vocating.’ You can have work without relationship. You can have a job all by yourself. But a vocation only comes when you're in relationship with someone who calls you (or better, Someone who calls you).” And God has called us all; we are all living in relationship with God. God calls a few Christians to full-time ministry, but God calls (“vocates!”) most of us to honor God’s claim on our lives by becoming faithful stewards of our gifts for ministry within the so-called secular realm.²

“Honoring our raw materials”

But what does vocation, our calling, have to do with getting out of the boat? In his book, John Ortberg³ calls it finding the line between “Thou shalt not be afraid” and “Thou shalt not be ridiculous.” It is being able to discern the difference between God’s call to get out of the boat and our own rash impulses.

This begins with appreciating who we really are. We are all made in God’s image. As God has work to do, so do we. Adam and Eve were given the garden of Eden to work, *before* they made the tragic choice to rebel against God. And though we are all made in God’s image, God has given us all differing personalities, desires, and talents that help to shape us for one sort of work or another. Ortberg writes, “To identify these [gifts] with clarity, to develop them with skill, and to use them joyfully and humbly to serve God and his creation is central to why you were created.” When we are honest with ourselves and God about our gifts and limitations, we are much more likely to discover our own calling. Ortberg calls this “honoring our raw materials.” When our work honors our raw materials, reality is our friend, the risks we take are much more likely to be wise.

“before you were born . . . “

What a remarkable beginning to Jeremiah’s vocation. God calls him, “vocates” him, while Jeremiah is still in the womb. God appoints Jeremiah as his prophet before Jeremiah is even born. Jeremiah may not have had a relationship with anyone else while he was in the womb, but he had a relationship with God.

In a similar vein, the psalmist wrote, “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb . . . All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be” (Psalm 139:14,16).

In Luke’s gospel, John, the unborn cousin of Jesus, leaps in his mother’s womb when pregnant Mary walks into the room (1:41).

These passages and others, remind us that it is God who is the author of life. We hold all life in trust. Human life of any sort is not ours to dispose of as we see fit. We belong to God. Hence, the Christian affirmation that all life is to be nurtured and protected, and the presumption for life in all circumstances. It is not surprising then that Christians have long debated and often disagreed about the use of violence in the pursuit of justice and self-defense.

For example, if I thought God was calling me to be an accountant, I’d be wrong. I simply lack the tools, such as a methodical attention to detail, that it takes to be a great accountant. Had I chosen that path for my life, I’d have ended up disappointed and burned out. It took me awhile to figure out that I am, at heart, a teacher and a learner. Looking back this seems obvious. When I was an Air Force pilot, I was an instructor pilot. I tutored others in finance during business school. Even when I went into the corporate world, the work I enjoyed the most was showing others that they could grow and achieve more than they ever thought possible. But looking back is easy – how do we get better at looking forward?

If someone calls to us, the key is to listen. Our vocation, the life to which God has called us, is something we discover . . . it is not something we choose. And others can help us listen better. Ortberg notes that the Quakers use what they call a “clearness committee,” which comes together to help test and discern someone’s perceived calling. Such a committee probably would have helped me to realize at a younger age where my gifts really lie. Many St. Andrew members have recently joined a small group. These groups are a great way to listen to God and to test our own callings. The groups are a little like assembling our own “clearness committees.” The truth is that I am much more likely to hear God clearly on any matter, if I have a group of trusted and mature disciples helping me to listen. They can help me to hear God calling me to step out of the boat and they can help warn me when God is saying stay in it.

¹Mark Roberts is the senior pastor of Irvine Presbyterian Church in California. He has one of the best blogs I’ve found. For example, he is currently posting a series titled, “Are the New Testament Gospels Reliable?” I’ve been reading Roberts’ blog for awhile and have found him to be both orthodox and a sound scholar. You can check out his blog at www.markdroberts.com.

²from the April 2005 issue of *Interpretation*, on the subject of vocation.

³Ortberg’s book, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You’ve Got to Get Out of the Boat* is the inspiration for this sermon series. I hope you’ll find the time to read it. Copies are available in *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore.

Daily Bible Readings

(more on vocation)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Genesis 3 God gives Moses his vocation – his mission and purpose.</p>	<p>Day 2 1 Samuel 3 God calls the boy, Samuel.</p>
<p>Day 3 1 Kings 19:19-21 Elijah calls Elisha to be his successor.</p>	<p>Day 4 Luke 19:1-10 Jesus calls Zaccaheus to a new vocation – that of a <i>righteous</i> tax collector!</p>
<p>Day 5 Galatians 1:11-24 Paul writes about his own vocation.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

October Book Recommendation

The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story

by Craig Bartholemew and Michael Goheen

Many Christians find it difficult to make sense of the Bible. We know a lot of stories and names but can't really see how they fit together in any meaningful way, or whether they even do. Who is Joshua and where does he fit in? What does the story of Moses and the Exodus have to do with Jesus and the Last Supper? Why is so much of Revelation grounded in the Old Testament? Isn't it about the future and not the past? What difference does it make that Jesus was Jewish?

Bartholemew and Goheen's book is one of the best I've found at conveying the full sweep of the over-arching biblical narrative. Told as a six-act play, the authors take us through the complete drama told in the pages of Scripture and help us to find our own place in it. It is well-indexed and I recommend it highly.

Available at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew Bookstore

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

You might begin by talking about the biblical witness that we all have vocations, callings, given us by God. Do you agree? What do you think is meant by "vocation?" Why do we often reserve "calling" to speak of those Christians who are in full-time ministry? How could your own career be seen as a calling? What would God find pleasing about your job?

How can a group of trusted fellow disciples help guide us in discovering our vocation? What process might you go through to hear God's call more clearly?

In his book, John Ortberg suggests that we discuss and reflect upon the following:

- "To what extent does your current work express your true giftedness and passion?"
- "Where has impulsivity gotten you into trouble? Where have you been likely to mistake vocation and foolishness?"
- "Reflect on your own life from childhood on. What activities and causes have brought you the most fulfillment?"
- "What limitation that's part of your 'raw material' is most painful to you?"
- "How clear are you about your sense of calling? How would you describe it in a sentence or two?"
- "What is a low-cost/low-risk way you might try to explore your calling further?"