“Jesus didn’t say no”

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Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:21-30

February 2, 2025 – 4th Sunday after Epiphany

***Jeremiah 1:4-10***

***Now 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.”***

***9Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth. 10******See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”***

***Luke 4:21-30***

***21Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”  22All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is this not Joseph’s son?” 23******He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’ ” 24And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in his hometown. 25But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months and there was a severe famine over all the land, 26yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. 27There were also many with a skin disease in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” 28When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 29They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. 30But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.***

I would not want the job of a prophet. If biblical texts are to be an example, prophets never have had it easy. When God calls, it seems, God means business. Perhaps we remember examples of other times in the Bible when someone was called by God to a particular task, not only that of a prophet like Jeremiah. Moses was called by God to lead the people out of slavery. Gideon was called by God in Judges. Prophets like Ezekiel, Isaiah, Elisha and Elijah were called by God. There is a similar formula for these call stories. Usually there is a report of an encounter with God, followed by a commission to do God’s will or speak God’s word. Then there is a ritual act or sign that will designate the role. Most reports of a call from God involve the person resisting the call, usually for very good reason. That’s where God’s assurance comes in, often by preparing the person well, or by giving them God’s direct help, and most often with the words Do not be afraid.

In Jeremiah’s case, it was the word of the Lord that came to him. Not a cloud, not a sound, not thunder or earth shaking. The word that came was one that declared an intimate bond with Jeremiah. “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.” In other words, God didn’t get to know Jeremiah first, watch his life, and then pick him out of a crowd. A call from God is a very intimate thing, and usually starts before we were ever aware of God’s eye on us. Jeremiah, as would anyone, is a bit startled and says “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak because I am just a boy.” It would be normal to resist a call from God because it would be a powerful experience. What do we do when *any* powerful feeling comes upon us?

Become silent. Take a deep breath. Deny the feeling. Worry.

What was that? I must just be tired. What does it mean? What will change?

Of course we would resist. Most normal people would begin by feeling unworthy. But God hears Jeremiah’s worry, and answers the concerns directly. “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.” And then God adds assurances for worries that Jeremiah left unsaid, God adds, “Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.”

In Biblical accounts of a call from God, after God’s assurances there is often a ritual act or sign that will further designate the role God has in mind. For example, Moses received a walking stick; Ezekiel ate a scroll; an angel touched the lips of Isaiah with a hot coal. So Jeremiah tells us, “Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth.”

Jeremiah has been reminded of the intimate nature of his relationship with God, called by God to be a prophet to the nations. When Jeremiah resists God not only answers Jeremiah’s stated objections but reinforces the presence and power of that intimate relationship they share and formalizes the call with a ritual. Then God clarifies the mission and gives Jeremiah his mission statement. “See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

Just like last week when the lectionary paired scripture from the old testament with scripture from the new testament, we find shared experiences and outcomes as well as differences between the two this week.

Jesus too has been chosen by God, sent by God, before he was born, to fulfill God’s word. The intimate nature of the relationship between God and Jesus has been described in all of our Christmas and Epiphany texts thus far. Jesus is not just a prophet called by God, but The prophet, the Messiah, not called but sent by God. Jesus did not resist. Jesus’ ritual sign that will confirm Jesus’ role and authority was his baptism, and the dove and cloud and voice – depending on which gospel story we read – telling others, who and what Jesus was.

Last week when we read the first part of the chapter that Craig read today, Jesus set out his mission statement. The words he read from the prophet Isaiah were coming true that day, right in front of those who were there in the room.

Jesus’ mission statement made clear what his work would be about. Jesus came “to bring good news to the poor, …to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Today’s scripture picks up where we left off last week. Those listening to Jesus were happy at first. They spoke well of him and liked the gracious words that came from his lips. The gospels of Matthew and Mark tell of more negative reactions to Jesus in the temple. But in Luke, the amazement of the crowd is evident in the question, “Is this not Joseph’s son?” Luke wants to emphasize that the crowd thought “it would have been inconceivable for the son of Joseph, born of such humble circumstances, to speak with such authority among the people in the synagogue.” This was the beginning of their resistance to the authority Jesus had – and he hadn’t even done anything in Galilee yet.

Jesus wasn’t here on earth though to bask in any human glory. As Jesus continued, the resistance grew as they heard Jesus’ words as blame and shame. What Jesus began to describe was the truth as he saw it. He knew that being a home town boy, they would expect the best of the best of any of Jesus’ authority and miracles. They would expect him to do in Galilee what he had done in Capernaum and other towns. By the time Jesus finished giving them examples of how the ancient prophets only came to outsiders, they had enough.

Here are the examples he gave.

1. But the truth is, there were *many* widows *in Israel* in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months and there was a severe famine over all the land, yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow *at Zarephath in Sidon*.
2. There were also many with a skin disease *in Israel* in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except *Naaman the Syrian*.”

And here’s what the people in the synagogue did when they had had enough.

“They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But Jesus passed through the midst of them and went on his way.”

One commentator wrote about this rejection of prophets that happened to both Jeremiah and Jesus. About Jeremiah she wrote, “But no one likes a prophet who is right, if that prophet is right about their demise.  So, he [Jeremiah] was exiled, threatened with violence, even death, thrown in jail cells and dried up wells.”4

And about Jesus she wrote, “No one like a prophet who is right, if that prophet is right about the fact that they have to share.  So, too, the people listening to Jesus were so angry, they drove him out of town and walked him to the side of a cliff “but he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.” Prophets in Hebrew Scripture and in the Gospels gonna keep prophesying!”4

By mentioning people and places far beyond the Galilean fishing villages, like the widow at Zaraphath, and Naaman of Syria, Jesus announces his vision as one that inclusive and wide ranging. We hear over and over in the gospel of John that Jesus has come as a light to *the world*, not just to a local area. Jesus has come for the sake of the world, not just our favorite places closest to our hearts. That’s not good news for anyone who expects favoritism from the local boy. It’s so aggravating that folks might just try to chase him off a cliff.

So far during this Epiphany season we have heard about Jesus’ early life. Having been claimed, tested and empowered, Jesus takes his authority public by teaching in the synagogue. The mission statement of Jesus, read last week as the words of Isaiah, is immediately tested when Jesus begins to describe the impact his teachings will have on the ways of the world as it currently stands. By describing the rejection that Jesus experienced, Luke has finished setting the scene for the rest of the gospel.

This is where we begin to wonder how we fit into the work of God in Jesus Christ during our day and age. We have all been called as disciples. Our messages got to us in different ways, some of us are better listeners than others, some are clear on the task, some are fuzzy. I find that sometimes what turns out to be a call from God at first seemed like a crooked path.

How will we be called? What will be asked to do? Will we be rejected and suffer also, for this work we’ve been called to do? These are normal questions. What is important is to pay attention to those things that keep turning up in our lives. Images that continually come to mind. A random thought that keeps running through our heads. Anything. God has prepared us for what God is calling us to do.

Let us pray,

1<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-jeremiah-14-10-11>

Chukka, Helen, February 2025

2<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-luke-421-30-6>

Smith, Abraham, February 2025

3Byron, Gay L., Working Preacher Commentary, Year C, Volume 1, pp.308-313.

4<https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2025-01-27/jeremiah-14-10-7/>

Jenista, Meg

5<https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2025-01-27/luke-421-30-4/>

Harmon, Chelsey