

EPIPHANY 4, Feb. 3, 2019, Year C

- It may come *suddenly* one day –in a surprising moment of sharp and clear realization– as if your cell phone might ring during church. Or it may come *gradually* – *emerging only slowly*, over the course of weeks or months. *Either way, all at once or bit by bit, clarity emerges.* Sometimes we are drawn to acknowledge it. And *sometimes, we resist it. It is a 'call'* – a calling from the source of holiness. We are *all called to respond to holiness*, and be *drawn into it*. In the process, we recognize that the *supernatural summons* us! We can then *receive and accept* our invitation.
- *Count on this: God's calling can and will come to you. For God's calling comes to every one of us...* just as it has come *again and again* to people *all over the world, throughout* history. In ancient Israel, this kind of call came to Abraham and his descendants, and to Jeremiah and other prophets like him. Later, it came to the disciples and their followers. We may find that we have much in common with all of them. *This is God's call for us to respond in faith.*
- There are varying ways to speak of these *moments of divine disclosure*, these **Epiphanies** of ever-emerging reality. For *the Spirit calling us* is not only *from* God; *the Spirit's call is* God ~ God *inviting, calling and summoning*. God's Spirit inspires us to rise up from one circumstance, or from one way of looking at the world, to be open to moving to another. We know dramatic stories in Scripture about people receiving a call from a burning bush and a voice from the sky. *More often, though, God's call comes through a kind of holy intuition*, an intuition not in the form of words, but *for which we provide the language*. God invites everyone, and God calls everyone. The Spirit prompts us to do God's will, *wherever* we find ourselves. And *God calls communities as well as individuals.*
- As we know, *God called Jeremiah to go and tell the truth, even when his words were not convenient or popular.*¹ God called Jeremiah to prophecy,

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and preserved his words and experience in Scripture. Yet, we should *not* think that God's call to him *was different from God's call to us*. *The Spirit's summoning presence is always right here in our midst*. God calls *someone* to be open to serving on the Vestry. God calls *another* to respond to an opportunity in the church. And God calls *still others* to meet particular needs in the wider community. *God calls! God's holy presence summons us. Without words, God's message speaks to us, from within ourselves, and through those around us. Here, there, and everywhere, God calls us to do holy work, to accomplish God's holy purposes.*

- That this is *true*, does *not* mean it is *clear*. In fact, *we often find God's call opaque and mysterious*. Martha and I, at several points in our lives, have found ourselves struggling for clarity about a possible call. Eleven years ago, we were wrestling with this question: *Was God really calling us away from our home* in Louisiana, especially when all three of our sons had just settled there, in order to serve a church a thousand miles away? *How about you?* You might be wondering if God is calling you to find a new job, or to serve in some ministry at church. And another member may be questioning whether God is calling her to reach out to someone who is hurting.
- When God's call seems unclear, or *doubtful*, *our experience can resemble Jeremiah's*. For God said to him, *"Before I shaped you in the womb, I knew all about you. Before you saw the light of day, I had holy plans for you..."*²
- *Yet*, Jeremiah said, *"Hold it, Master God! Look at me. I don't know anything. I'm only a child!"* ~> But that's just what we say!: 'I am *unprepared*... I'm *not sure*... I *don't have* the skills or the courage to meet that challenge.'
Communities and churches are capable of the same sentiments, when receiving a similar call: "Hold it, Lord. Look at us. We don't know anything. We are only amateurs in the faith!"

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- *Let's notice this: God called Jeremiah when he was **not** expecting it.* God's call came to him *unasked*. And it left him feeling *inadequate* for the task! But *all this was for a purpose*—to help Jeremiah see that *if the call was from God, God would give him strength*. God would give him *courage* and *vision*, so *he could respond faithfully*, even amidst challenge and adversity. *The same is true for us, especially as a parish church.*
- *We might assume that, 'in a perfect world,' God's call only leads to good things, like **harmony, peace and goodwill**.* But Scripture and Christian history *suggest otherwise!* In our world, at least initially, God's call sometimes leads to other things,... to things like *confusion* or *anxiety*, *precisely so that the Spirit's truer peace may emerge*. God's call can *disrupt things as they are now, allowing patterns of grace to replace them*. And God's call can also leave us feeling *challenged* rather than *affirmed*. **Here is the point:** in situations like these, God's purpose is *not* to bring *confusion, disruption* even if it brings *challenge*. **God's purpose is to further our growth and fulfillment.** This is why we pay attention to *how the community hears a call, just as much as we attend to how individuals hear it*. Since hearing a call can be challenging, *we seek to do this kind of 'Spirit-listening' in community ~ and, for the sake of community.*
- *Today's Gospel* continues from last week's story about Jesus speaking in his hometown synagogue. *He reveals something profound about his own call,* which *points to* the way that God is calling his Nazareth community. At first, Jesus' former neighbors praise him, expressing marvel at his words and deeds. But when *they discern how his prophetic ministry has expansive implications, rather than being narrowly focused on benefits for his hometown,* everything changes. *After marveling at him, they lead him to the brow of a hill, so they can kill him!* Just as the leaders of Jerusalem wanted to do to Jeremiah, some 500 years earlier.

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- Paradox abounds in this story from *early in Jesus' public ministry*. His teaching and works of healing reveal that he is filled with the power of God's spirit. *God's Spirit can do anything. Except that God gives us the curious freedom to refuse the Spirit's power.* Sometimes we refuse this power *overtly*, especially when we feel like God is asking us to do something difficult or uncomfortable. And *sometimes we refuse this power through subtle denial, by closing our hearts and minds to new possibilities toward which God is leading us.* The folks in Nazareth want their hometown wonderworker to *stay 'local,'* and bring *focused blessings* upon *them*. Yet, they refuse to see how Jesus' vocation exceeds the limited parameters they allow for him, and for themselves, as well.
- We may not share Jeremiah's *particular* vocation to be a **prophet**. But that *doesn't mean we haven't received a vocation, a calling.* For we are *all called!* We are called to participate together in God's Word, as the Spirit-led community. We are called to flourish together within our Lord's Body. And, we are called to share his holy life with those who have not yet experienced it. These things can be hard to do. But *God always give us the grace and strength to respond to the Spirit's call.* For, as a community, we have been called!



James Tissot, *The Brow of the Hill Near Nazareth*

Jeremiah 1:4-10

The word of the Lord came to me saying,

"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."

Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But 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,
Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,

says the Lord."

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.
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

In the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus read from the book of the prophet Isaiah, and began to say, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" 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.'" And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. 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. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 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 he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

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Notes:

¹ Note that the primary vocation of prophecy in the Old Testament was truth-telling, especially in relation to God's prior revelation. This differs from a vocation to predict the future. The New Testament –evident particularly in Matthew– propensity to speak of the fulfillment of Scripture leads us to assume that prediction was a prophet's primary vocation.

² From *The Message* translation of our first reading, Jeremiah 1:4-10, for this and the following quote. {note ~ the word "boy" has been changed to that of "child."}