

“NOT ‘ONLY’”

Lamington Presbyterian Church

August 25, 2019; 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Hebrews 12:18-29

***“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...”***

Jeremiah 1:7a

Apart from the paper route I had as a kid — delivering the Asbury Park Evening Press from my bicycle — my first job was working in a roadside stand selling Christmas trees. I got the job when I was just 15: younger than the usual legal age, but the business was classified as an agricultural operation, so they could hire younger kids. That also meant the owners got to pay us at the lower agricultural minimum wage: a dollar twenty-five an hour, if I remember right (plus the occasional tip for tying a Christmas tree on top of someone’s car).

It was hard work, especially on cold, snowy days. The farm stand had a little shed with an electric space heater. My fellow teenage tree salesmen and I would duck in there whenever we could, but it seemed like we never had enough time to warm up.

I felt very young to be out there in the working world. The pair of Italian brothers who owned the stand were in their fifties. The twentysomething son of one of them, whom his father and uncle had put in charge of us boys, lorded his age and experience over us. He took every opportunity to shoo us out of the

toasty-warm shed so we could sell more trees. He did it even if there were no customers on the lot. I think Charles Dickens could have done something with his character.

But I was only a boy, so what did I have to say about it? I was low man on the totem pole. He knew it and I knew it.

Many times I thought about quitting: but I was glad to have the meager pocket money I was earning, and besides, I would have been embarrassed to go home and tell my parents I couldn't stick it out for the few more weeks the tree stand was open.

Then one day I looked up and saw my grandparents drive into the parking lot. They'd come down to visit our family, and decided to come over to see me at my place of employment. I was astounded to discover that my grandfather — an obstetrical surgeon whose medical practice was in the next county — knew the pair of brothers who owned the stand. They came out and gave him a big greeting.

One of the brothers called me over and said, “You never told me you were Dr. MacKenzie's grandson.”

It had never occurred to me they would even know him.

Then the one brother pointed at his son — my tormentor. “See that boy over there?” he said to me. “He wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for your

grandfather!” Apparently, it had been a high-risk pregnancy, and my grandfather’s emergency C-section saved the day.

I don’t think their son’s jaw could have dropped any lower in astonishment, as he realized the boy he’d been abusing was a person of consequence. After that, I got to spend as much time in the shed, warming my hands, as I wanted.

I may have been only a boy, but it mattered whose boy I was.

“But I am only a boy.” That’s what Jeremiah blurts out in today’s first lesson, when the Lord tells him he’s got a few things for him to do, by way of prophecy.

Which doesn’t impress the Lord one bit: who’s also told him, “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.” (1:5).

Can you think of a more effective way of saying Jeremiah has no choice in the matter? That Hebrew word translated, here, as “consecrated” could just as well be translated “ordained.” We use the word “ordained” to refer to a solemn ceremony at the start of someone’s service as minister, elder or deacon. Yet, God says Jeremiah is ordained a prophet before he’s even out of the womb! His prophecy contract is already signed, sealed and delivered before he draws his first

breath.

Pay attention, too, to the little phrase, “prophet to the nations.” The word “nations,” in Hebrew — and in Greek, too, for that matter — refers not to the people of Israel, but to everyone else on this earth. This boy, Jeremiah, will in his time become a truly international figure. He will issue edicts, in the Lord’s name, to the Kings of Babylon and Egypt — not to mention the pathetic, powerless rulers of Judah.

Here’s how that “prophet to the nations” thing will work out for him in the years ahead. One day, as the scriptures tell it, he finds himself in a caravan of exiles, being carted off to Babylon — the empire that’s just overrun his little nation. Suddenly the caravan is halted, by order of the King. The royal emissary — who’s come straight from Nebuchadnezzar himself — is asking for Jeremiah by name. The King has ordered that Jeremiah alone, out of all that sorry column of refugees, be given his freedom, and sent back home to Judah. Now whether that’s because the King doesn’t want this troublemaker in Babylon, or whether he figures Jeremiah will do more to advance the Babylonian cause by keeping Judah on edge, is anybody’s guess.

The point is, Jeremiah learns from the Lord, at the very outset, that he’s got the biggest possible job. His call as “prophet to the nations” will take him way

outside his comfort zone. God’s calling him to become a sort of citizen of the world: a man without a country.

So what does young Jeremiah have to say about it? The best he can come up with is that “I am only a boy” line.

You think that’s going to make the slightest difference, Jeremiah? Just remember: God called you *before* you were even a boy. Before you were an infant, in fact. Before you were the proverbial twinkle in your parent’s eye!

Come to think about it, that sort of response to God’s call is pretty common, in the Bible. Folks tend to treat it like it’s an envelope filled with powdered anthrax. “No, no, Lord, this has got to be a mistake. Yes, I see it’s got my name and address on it, but you’ve got to have someone else in mind.”

But, isn’t that so often the way with us: when it comes to this troubling question of whether or not God’s calling you or me to do something?

The standard response is, “You’ve gotta be kidding! I can’t do that! I am only...”

You fill in the blank. You fill it in, because you know what your favored answer is — the all-purpose excuse that keeps you mired right where you are, every time it crosses your mind that God may want you to step out of the daily

grind and venture something new! Every time, in other words, you begin to suspect *you* could have a call from God.

Now, let em explain something. When I say “call from God,” I’m not talking about going to seminary and becoming a minister. That’s my call. Chances are, it’s not yours (although it could be — only you can say, if you’ve heard that quiet whisper of an inner voice).

When the Lord sends a team out onto the field, it’s never composed exclusively of quarterbacks. What a train wreck that would be! Someone’s needed to hike the ball, and someone else to catch it. Others are needed to block on the line and kick field goals — even carry water, and write press releases. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians:

“There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” (1 Corinthians 12:4-7)

For Jeremiah — who begins his journey by saying “I am only a boy” — saying yes to God’s call becomes a matter of supreme joy. Not that he has no complaints: the Lamentations of Jeremiah are a whole separate book of the Bible, chronicling his irritation at the many bad things that happen to him! No, it’s just

that becoming prophet to the nations is Jeremiah’s call, his destiny, the one thing he was placed on this earth to do.

Frederick Buechner has a definition of vocation that’s been quoted many times. “The place where God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger coincide.” Truer words have never been spoken.

Jeremiah says yes, eventually. He will remember, all his life, something else the Lord said to him that day:

“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.” (1:7-8)

In other words, God’s saying to Jeremiah: “Don’t worry, son, you won’t be out there alone. I’ve got your back.”

Isn’t this so typical of the way God operates? God calls all kinds of people, to do all kinds of crazy things in this world. As with those men mending their nets by the Sea of Galilee, called by Jesus, God doesn’t even seem to look for qualified people. God calls first, and qualifies later. “Sure, jump into the deep end. I know you don’t know how to swim: but I am with you to deliver you,” says the Lord. “Be patient. I will teach you everything you need to know.”

So, what’s the “deep end” God’s calling *you* to jump into? What’s the thing you’ve been feeling you ought to be doing, but about which you keep saying — like Jeremiah — “I’m only...”

A boy, in *his* case — too young, too green, too inexperienced. What is it for you? Too young... too old... too strapped for funds... too tied down, at the moment... too tired... too afraid? Or do you shift from one excuse to the other, each time that hint of a calling bubbles up?

It will keep bubbling up, you know. If the call’s from God, it will do that. Remember how it is, in the Bible, with that classic tale of God’s call to the boy, Samuel? God says, “Samuel,” and Samuel wakes from a sound sleep, saying “Who said that?” It happens again and again. God just keeps calling — whispering is more like it. But God keeps at it. Until Samuel says, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” (1 Samuel 3:1-18)

A call from God doesn’t have to be spectacular. It doesn’t always have to set (or re-set) the entire direction of our lives. Somebody once said it’s like God has given us each a thousand dollars, to offer back, in service. For some, the best way to respond is to take the entire thousand-dollar bill and lay it on the table saying, “Here, Lord, it’s yours: take all of it!”

For others of us — probably a large majority, I expect — it’s more like

cashing in the thousand and getting a whole lot of coins in exchange. Then, you walk around with a roll of quarters in your pocket all the time. When you see a need that can be met, you reach into your pocket and pull one out. You do it again and again, each time God places a need in your path — and, at the end of the day, you will have used your thousand bucks as faithfully as the person who laid the whole thing out there, right at the beginning.

It’s a question of values. It’s a matter of keeping an ear out for what’s important in life, and not let ourselves get distracted by the “onlies.”

The next time you find yourself falling back on the onlies — only a kid, only an old person, only too busy, only a shy person, only an ordinary person, only whatever — here’s something you can try. Try replacing the phrase “But I am only...” with the phrase “I am the one.” You may be surprised how it changes your perspective. Suddenly what had sounded crazy, impossible, begins to make sense.

This next story has nothing to do with the church — in fact, it’s about a man, Steve Jobs of Apple Computer, who didn’t even believe in God, in the conventional sense — but it’s a good illustration of finding a calling, all the same.

There was a famous incident when the new Apple Computer company was doing very well — so well, Steve Jobs realized he had to find an experienced

business executive to see to the management details, so he could stay focused on the creative aspects.

Jobs went after one of the big guns in American business: a man named John Scully, senior vice-president of the Pepsi soft-drink company. Everyone who knew John Scully was convinced he was heading straight for the senior executive suite — if not at Pepsi, then at some other Fortune 500 company.

Apple, back then was a brash young Silicon Valley start-up. It was a darling of venture capitalists, but it was very small, and the company’s future was far from assured. Scully was fascinated by what Jobs had done, so when he got an invitation to dinner, he accepted. He figured it would be a learning experience, if nothing else.

Jobs told him right from the start of the dinner that he wanted him to come run Apple Computer. What happened next was a long series of excuses, as Scully laid out all the reasons why he wasn’t going to leave Pepsi. Career-wise, it was like jumping from an cruise ship into a fast, little speedboat. It was not the sort of thing anyone did.

But Steve Jobs wouldn’t take no for an answer. He came back with a response that was so brash, so self-assured, it knocked Scully back on his heels. Jobs said to him: “John, what are you doing with your life? Are you going to

spend it making colored sugar water, or are you going to come to Apple Computer and change the world?”

Scully said, later, that as soon as he heard those words, he knew he would never draw another paycheck from Pepsi. He received not a job offer that day, but a call.

So, as you go out into this world that, as the poet says, is “charged with the grandeur of God,” I invite you to set aside times to listen. Listen for the call. Listen to that voice within, that may be inviting you to change your life — or simply to go grocery shopping for the elderly neighbor who needs some help. Don’t worry: if it’s work worth doing, no job is too small, and God is surely in it. And whatever happens, remember: God has your back.

Let us pray:

**Lord, we confess
how hesitant we are,
how wary,
when it comes to taking the risk of listening for your call.
We are afraid we may not hear it.
We are even more afraid that we will.
But even so, we say to you:
speak, Lord: for your servant hears.**