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Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
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The Call of God: Part One

Jeremiah 1:4-10 *Now 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.”*

Luke 4:21-30 *Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture
has been fulfilled in your hearing.”*

Today and next Sunday I want to explore “call.” What is call? Who is it that calls us? What does it mean to be persons and a community that live on the basis of call?

Call is at the heart of the life of faith. Life is not an endurance test in which we try to get by with as little suffering as possible until it’s all over. Despite the popular religious view, our lives as Christians are not a matter of living a nice moral life—keeping our noses clean—so we can gain the afterlife. Life is neither meaningless endurance nor simply a means to an end. We have a spiritual center that when touched and followed brings us fulfillment in this life. This spiritual center—call it the soul, the heart, the consciousness, the spirit--is grounded in the God who calls us into life, who blesses us and unfolds in us what we are truly meant to be and to do. Christian faith is not simply belief that God exists. It is a relationship with the very Power of Life itself, with God who draws us, sometimes gently, sometimes joltingly, in particular directions. Those directions are the unique ways you and I are given to express and manifest God’s redeeming love in the world.

I grew up in the church, in a minister’s family. Sunday school and worship were not options for me, but I didn’t really mind. I don’t think I suffered as much from the “preacher’s kid” syndrome as some. Life in the church was basically a spiritually healthy experience for me. Summers found me at Craig Springs, the Disciples of Christ campground tucked against the mountains near Newcastle, Virginia. Those weeks were a touching of the deepest realities of life. I was part of a gathering of youth and adults who took seriously the call to a meaningful life, to deeper community with each other and the world as creation. With the guidance of caring adults, we explored what God might have in mind for us out of our unique gifts, sensitivities, and abilities. With all its faults and weaknesses and failings, the church for me was the community that held up this truth--we are on this earth to fulfill a purpose for our lives, a purpose given us by God who made the earth and the universe itself.

Now as I share the life and ministry of the Church of the Covenant with you, I feel very much at home. This is a community that, from its beginnings, has held up for itself and all who come here the life of being called by God. The called life is as true and as needed by this world as ever. What we need is to refocus on it, talk about it, and help each other live the life of those called by God in Christ to be and bear good news in the world, beginning with our own community and our own city.

Today we heard the story of the call of the prophet Jeremiah. He ministered in the years before the spiritually wrenching experience of the Exile. In only a couple of decades, the armies of Babylon would destroy Jerusalem and its temple and cart off into exile most of the leadership of the Jewish people. Jeremiah was called by God to speak God’s words in this time. Amid the approach of impending disaster Jeremiah spoke of

the need to return to God, to re-root life in God. Jeremiah's work did not prevent the storm that was coming, but it did something more important. His ministry, which drew hard and sometimes violence resistance, sowed the seeds of a renewed faith that would germinate and begin to grow even in the winter of exile.

Jeremiah's call is not our call. God calls us to particular tasks and ministries for our time, out of our own relationships with God. The point is to get in touch with this God who calls us, each of us, to become what God has gifted us to be and do for the benefit of all life.

I want to point to some aspects of call in this story of Jeremiah's call. These can tell us something about the God who calls us and about the life of being called.

God who calls us knows us deeply, fully, and intimately. "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." The Hebrew word "know" that is used here has a profoundly intimate meaning. In other places it refers to sexual relationships. Here the meaning is as intimate as you can get.

We each have this foremost relationship of our lives. Not with other people, but with God, the creator and sustainer of life, the power that is at the foundation of life itself. Each of us belongs to God and to life. Faith is not a matter of working our way into a relationship with God. Our spiritual work is the allowing of that relationship, which is already there, to be discovered or recovered and deepened so that it becomes the dynamic center of our lives.

The first step toward a life based on call is spiritual work of awakening to this relationship that we already have with God. We each belong intimately, ultimately, and unshakably to God. When Paul writes in his famous "love chapter" in First Corinthians these words, he is saying much the same thing: "Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, **even as I have been fully known.**" Being known fully and intimately by God should not be frightening but empowering. For the God who knows us inside and out is the God who loves us as we are and loves us into all that we can become.

God who knows us deeply and fully also calls us into holiness and commissions us to live out the purposes God gives us for our lives. When God tells Jeremiah that before he was born God consecrated him, this means that God made him to share in God's own being, God's own holiness, the sacred dimension of life. This is part of what it means to be created in the image of God (Gen. 1). Our truest nature is to express in our own lives the very nature of God. Holiness is not about the trivial kinds of piety that many of us have heard all our lives from the church. Such trivializing of the sacred dimension of our lives turns Christian faith into a kind of merit badge system, totally self-centered and obsessed with our own moral performance. Being consecrated, or holy, doesn't mean becoming sanctimonious people, our feet lifted off the earth and our noses turned up at ordinary human life. It means the very opposite. Sharing God's holiness, being consecrated by God, means living fully in the world with the awareness that we are channels of God's presence, love, and divine energy in the world and for the world. It means living out in our lives the very nature of God, which is love. That is why Paul, in that same chapter of 1 Corinthians, writes that if we do all sorts of moral and spiritual things, but are not living out of *agape*, the kind of love that is God's own nature, then we are just a lot of noise and hot air.

Our commissioning by God is the particular way that God sends us into the world, into life, to be the unique persons God made us to be. We are each given gifts, abilities, sensitivities that are the means of fulfilling what God made us to be and do.

Here we need a strong word of warning: we cannot and should not compare ourselves and our lives, our sense of call and our gifts, to anyone else. Comparison is the death of the spiritual life. Our spiritual work is to become fully aware of God's

movement in our own lives, the hints, the nudgings, the revealings that tell us who we really are and what we uniquely have to offer to the world.

Jeremiah felt inadequate to God's call. He felt that his youth disqualified him from being and doing what God called him to be and do. But to his fears, insecurities, and ambivalence, God promised eternal presence with him. Jeremiah's strength, energy, and confidence would come not first of all from his own sense of adequacy or ability, but from his relationship with God, the very source of his life. So with us. What keeps us from our calling? It may not be our youth. Perhaps our fears, or a poor self-image, or the sense that what we really feel called to do is not as important as what others seem to be doing. There's that comparison thing! To follow our sense of call deepens our life of prayer, the inward journey, in which we learn more and more what it means to go with God's presence, to live out of the love and power of God, not out of our own self-evaluations.

Finally, **the God who calls us is the God of all nations, all peoples, and desires the well being of every human being on earth.** Jeremiah's ministry was in a day when Josiah, king of Israel, was carrying out a heavy-duty nationalistic reformation. Foreign elements were being cleansed from society and religion. There was a strong pressure toward nationalistic coherence—"us" against "them." Jeremiah's message would not play well in this environment. The God of Israel was also the God of all nations. Jeremiah's was appointed to speak to all nations and peoples of God, to express in his life and words the God who is the God of all.

We might imagine that around Jerusalem in those days, the donkey carts had bumper stickers on them—"God bless our nation." But Jeremiah's donkey cart, if he had one, probably had a bumper sticker that said—"God bless all nations." This is the same thing that got people riled up in the synagogue in Nazareth the day Jesus read from Isaiah 61. Jesus anticipated their desire that he should perform miracles in his own hometown, that he should pay more attention to them and less to all those other folks. He reminded them of two stories from Hebrew scriptures which told of God's caring for foreigners, Gentiles, non-believers. The God to whom both Jeremiah and Jesus bore witness was the God whose love and redemptive purposes were for everyone, for all nations and peoples. This message plays no better today than it did then. But we who follow Christ must speak and live the message: God is not the tribal deity of one nation or one people, much less one religion or one denomination; God is the God of all peoples and nations.

Jesus' life and ministry were announced in the framework of Isaiah 61—the ministry of good news, of healing, of liberation, of comfort, of peace and justice. All of this has to do with the well being of all people, those near us, in our own town, and those throughout the world.

God's call in our lives reveals the unique ways in which we are each able to express God's love for the world. The outward journey of the life of faith is the discovering of how our unique callings and gifts can touch some point in the suffering of the world. This is the truly creative part of the life of being called. It is envisioning ways in which what we are called and gifted to be and do can be part of the good news of God's reign that Jesus proclaimed and embodied in his own life. Being who we truly are created to be and meeting some need in the world come together in the life of faith.

Let us each be on that inward journey of becoming fully aware of God who calls us to become what we were uniquely created to be and to do.

Let us also be on that outward journey of discovering how our unique being and calling in God is meant to bring good news to the world.