

Saying is believing

By [Martin B. Copenhaver](#)

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One of the things I most appreciate about the call stories in the Bible is that there is no single template. When Peter, Andrew, James and John are summoned by Jesus to leave their nets to follow him, “immediately” they do just that (Luke 4:18-22). When God calls Jonah to go to Ninevah, he also gets going immediately—but in the exact opposite direction (Jonah 1:1-3).

In this week's Old Testament passage, Jeremiah at first protests God's call, in part for the same reason Moses does (Ex. 4:10)—because he is not a good speaker. Then there is the rich young ruler who, when called by Jesus to sell his possessions and follow him, responds only with sadness (Luke 18:22-23). We hear nothing more about him, presumably because he simply walked away.

The stunning variety of these call stories testifies both to the ingenuity of God, who has more than one means of working in our lives, and to human freedom, which allows for more than one possible response.

It is important to remember that these accounts are all written in retrospect. Jeremiah, writing as a grown man, traces his call to an experience as a 14-year-old. Whether the full meaning and import of that experience was known fully when he was only 14 may be another matter.

This should not be surprising. In my tradition today, candidates for ordination are asked to tell the story of their own call to ministry, often over and over again, both on paper and verbally before different church bodies. In recent years I have had occasion to hear candidates give the story of their calls at different junctures in ordination process. Often the story changes with each telling, usually becoming sharper and more focused, accompanied by an extra measure of certainty.

There are different ways to interpret this evolution. The cynical interpretation would be that, as candidates proceed through the ordination process, they learn more

about what various ecclesiastical bodies want to hear and simply deliver it to them. But most often, I don't think that this is the case. Another possible interpretation might be that candidates just get better at telling their stories with the continual retelling. I am sure this is a partial explanation in many instances.

But there is a third possibility—that a candidate for ordination, by retelling his or her story of call, actually sees with greater clarity what God was up to at certain junctures. Sometimes you don't see something until you say it. And sometimes saying is believing.

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