

Reluctant prophets: Jeremiah 1:4-10

Sunday's Coming Premium

August 10, 2010

My grandmother was 14 years old and living on a farm in Michigan when she made an appointment with her Presbyterian minister to tell him that she felt called to the ministry. "I'm sorry, Emma," he said. "You must be mistaken. God doesn't call women into the ministry." A day or two later her father went to see the minister. "If Emma says she's called to preach, she's called to preach—and what's more, she could preach circles around any boy in this county." Needless to say, the conviction of a girl and the entreaties of her father did not prevail over the Presbyterian practices of the day. Emma persisted, however, and in 1902 she found a denomination that would ordain her—the Christian Churches, a predecessor denomination of the United Church of Christ. She served congregations for many years.

To be sure, it's not unusual for a young person to have a sense of call. Sometimes those intimations are fleeting, as a young person's imagination alights on one calling and then another. Not every child who feels called to be an astronaut ends up in space. But I know doctors, teachers, musicians and ministers who have had a clear sense of call from a very early age and in ways that have not wavered over time. What is striking in my grandmother's case is that there was nothing in the culture of the time or in her own experience that would encourage her to imagine that she could be a minister. She had never seen a woman minister, and yet she saw herself as one.

What amazes me even more is that my grandmother was almost painfully shy. She was not the kind of person who would storm the pulpit. She did not exhibit the confidence of a trailblazer. But she knew that she was called to preach, so she persisted. Anything else would have seemed like denial. I am told that when she was preaching she exhibited a quiet confidence that made her a strong presence in the pulpit, but in the fellowship hour she looked as if she wanted to fade into the background. I imagine that ministry took a toll on her as she pushed through her shyness to assume the public tasks of the minister. That is the effect that an

unassailable sense of call can have on a person. You do what you have to do to follow that call. It's as if it's been in the fabric of your being since you were knit together in your mother's womb—or, in Jeremiah's case, even sooner.

Jeremiah testifies that the Lord told him that he was called as “a prophet to the nations” even before he was conceived. He makes it clear that he did not respond to God, as Isaiah did, with “Here am I, Lord, send me.” Instead, he tries to beg off. First he says, “I do not know how to speak,” which recalls Moses trying to demure from his call: “I am slow of speech and slow of tongue” (Exod. 4:10). Then Jeremiah uses his age as an excuse: “I am only a boy.”

We do not know how old Jeremiah was when he realized that he had been called to be a prophet. But even at an early age he knew that the call was undeniable. After marshaling his best defense, he heard God respond with something like a rebuke: “You will go where you are sent and say whatever you are told.” It was just as simple and as challenging as that.

A reluctant prophet may be the only one worth calling because he or she is likely to be the one who knows what is required to be a faithful prophet. God does not soft-pedal the magnitude of what Jeremiah is called to do. He is given authority over nations and kingdoms. He will pull down empires and plant new ones. That's quite an assignment for a boy who knows that he is not good at public speaking.

The call and the magnitude of the task are closely related in this passage for good reason. There is no way that a boy with a speech problem would take on this assignment if he didn't have an unassailable sense of call. People will do things they previously considered unthinkable in two circumstances: when they are head over heels in love and when they have a firm sense of call.

A while back I had a conversation with a good friend who also is a minister. He is experiencing the grinding challenges of ministry in a local church. “Have you thought of doing something else?” I asked. “Sure,” he said, “but I believe God called me into this work, and I haven't received any other instructions.” What can you say in response to that? Jeremiah knew that nothing more could be said, either.