

C'mon God, I'm Only Human!

A Sermon by Louise Westfall

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Text: Jeremiah 1:4-10

Sometimes a call to action comes to you gradually, unfolding and taking shape over time. But sometimes, it just reaches out and grabs you—in response to a crisis like Haiti, for example—or, in the case of the Salwen family, at a red light. Elder Jim Dakin sent me an article about this Atlanta family whose lives made a U-turn one day as the father drove the 14-year-old daughter home from a sleep-over. While stopped at a traffic signal, Hannah noticed a Mercedes on one side and a homeless man begging for food on the other. “Dad, if that man had a less nice car, that man there could have a meal,” she wondered aloud. The light changed and they drove on, but Hannah could not let go of the inequity before her eyes and kept bugging her parents about wanting to do something to make a difference.

What Hannah came up with was crazy, grandly impractical.... and utterly inspiring: selling their large, luxurious home and donating half the proceeds to charity, while using the other half to buy a more modest replacement home. Eventually, that’s what the family did. They moved into a smaller home, researched various philanthropic organizations and charities and chose the Hunger Project to make a significant gift to support health, microfinancing, and food programs for about 40 villages in Ghana. *[Nicholas D. Kristof, The New York Times, January 24, 2010]*

The Bible is chock-full of examples of how God calls people to particular work God wants done. Some are dramatic and impossible to miss: Moses heard God speaking from a burning bush. An angel appeared to Mary and announced that she would become mother of Messiah. Paul had his “Damascus Road” experience, where he was literally knocked off his high horse and blinded (and healed from blindness) by the light of Christ. Many others, however, became aware that God was recruiting them for some mission slowly over time. David the Shepherd was anointed King against the odds, yet God practically had to shout through David’s personal ambition and agenda to get David to hear and obey. Young Samuel heard a voice calling him, but needed the wise old priest Eli to help him understand it. Queen Esther never did attribute her brave actions to divine plan, but leveraged her position of power to save her people. Sometimes you choose your call; sometimes it chooses you.

Today's text tells of another biblical call, this one to a young Judean during a very hard time of Israel's history. Enemy nations threatened Israel on all sides. The nation itself seemed to have lost its footing; its leaders were corrupt and self-serving. Some citizens lived in luxury, while others were virtually enslaved and in great need, united only by anxiety and doubts that a good future was within reach. Something had to be done. We don't know much about Jeremiah, but it's safe to say that nobody had pegged him for leadership. He wasn't a priest or part of the ruling class. He was too young and untested to have distinguished himself as a mover and shaker. Yet there he was, going about his daily routine, when he got a call. As we read the biblical account of it, I invite us to put ourselves in Jeremiah's shoes, or sandals, as the case might be. Hear the call as if it were to you. Note what God is asking Jeremiah to do, and Jeremiah's initial resistance. Especially notice how God overrules this resistance and what assurances God offers. Listen for God's Word to you in the reading from the book of the prophet Jeremiah, in the first chapter at the fourth verse. [JEREMIAH 1:4-10]

My colleague Missy and I have great empathy for Jeremiah and his feelings of inadequacy. After all, he admits he's "only a boy" -and apparently realizes it's tough to send a boy to do a woman's job. But Eric and Dick quickly explained that Jeremiah was talking about his *age* not his *gender*. Whatever. Jeremiah's immediate response to God's call is to object. *I'm too young, I'm too inexperienced, I don't know how to speak in public*—you can just hear the barriers going up. *C'mon God, I'm only human!* And who can blame him? God is annoyingly non-specific in his call, just saying that he had appointed Jeremiah to be God's mouthpiece, the proclaimer of God's truth to any and all to whom God will send him, which includes unidentified "nations and kingdoms." His words were going to have both negative consequences—to pull down and destroy and overthrow---and positive ones---to build and to plant. God hints that these proclamations might not always be well-received, but Jeremiah is not to be afraid. Well, we've heard that before! In fact, beware when heavenly voices tell you to "fear not" because you can almost be certain the next word out of their mouths will make your heart pound and your stomach do a backflip.

But curiously and graciously God gives only one reason not to be afraid. It's not that Jeremiah will grow up and get good at God's work; it's not that the work is a piece of cake and therefore doesn't merit fear; it's not that God will smite the enemies and naysayers while granting Jeremiah success in every endeavor. No, God says don't be afraid *for I am with you*. That's all. Just a promise of God's presence at all times and in every circumstance, no matter the steepness of the climb or the complexity of the problem or the hopelessness of the outcome. *I am with you*.

God is still calling people as prophets and messengers and leaders and servants. God is still calling people to overthrow evil and plant seeds of love and hope. God is still calling us to do divine work and God is still promising to be with us, no matter what.

So.....take a deep breath as I introduce you to the newest members of our church staff: you! Check out the photograph I took from the pulpit last Sunday, and the staff listing on the back of the bulletin. Every member of Fairmount is a minister, someone who shares God's grace with others and serves the people God loves. The theological basis for this is rooted in the Reformed theological perspective of "the priesthood of all believers." No ordained intermediary is required to connect God and humanity; you (and every person of faith) have a direct line to the Almighty. While God calls some persons to particular roles as ordained clergy, elders, or deacons, God calls all of us for service. To be ministers, doing the work of faith, day in and day out.

We exercise our ministry as we care for one another, as we seek to grow in faith, and as we worship God. During the season of Lent which begins in mid-February, we're taking an additional step to launch the "every member a minister" campaign. During this six week period, we'll invite every member and friend of Fairmount to choose a ministry beyond the walls of our church, to serve people in need in our city and region or throughout the world. You might participate in an already established Fairmount ministry—and there will be plenty of information about these available. You might choose to continue a ministry you're already doing, but help Fairmount connect more closely with it. I envision individuals and families developing ministries they can do together. It might be a single project or an on-going service. All this action has to be supported by prayer, so that will be a ministry as well. The idea is to discern your unique call during Lent, the traditional season of self-examination and reflection upon one's faith. There will be time during those six weeks to listen for what particular task God is calling you to do and to commit to doing it. We'll invite you to fill out a commitment card and wear a sign of that commitment in the form of a woven bracelet –a smaller version of the stoles ministers wear, representing the yoke of service. Your ministry may be completed this Spring or carried over into the Summer. Beginning in September, we'll feature a different ministry every Sunday during worship, sharing how it has made a difference. . . . out there, and in here.

But what of our objections? *I'm too young, I'm too old, I'm too busy, that's for someone else, I can't do another thing, I've never done that kind of thing, c'mon God I'm only human . . .* I can tell you there's no better view in this church than the one I have, looking into your eyes and feeling our connection and our

shared mission. But on any given Sunday, only about one-quarter of our members gather to worship. Part of my fear is represented by the empty [chairs/pews]: can we really persuade *every* member to claim their role as minister??? Like Jeremiah and practically all the saints who went before us, we have our doubts. We may be reluctant to say “yes” to God’s call. We may question our ability. Or we may fear what God is asking us to do, and the changes we may have to make in order to do it. But those are problems we can leave to God, who seems to think that “only human” is the best way to do what needs doing. Those are worries we can leave with the One who promises *I am with you*. Friends, when all is said and done, that’s really the only qualification we need to say “yes.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, the Salwen family I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon have had to deal with objections and criticism. Another of their children didn’t see how life could be better in a smaller house and giving money to poor people. Neighbors have called them grandstanders and show-offs. Still others have questioned their choice of a global project when the needs at home are so great.

But the family is undeterred—and in fact, was surprised by some unforeseen consequences. They had always assumed they would be better off in a bigger house. But once they downsized, there was much less space to retreat to, so the family members spent more time around each other. “We essentially traded “stuff” for togetherness and connectedness,” Mr. Salwen said. “I’m thrilled that we can help others, [but] I’m blown away by how much it has helped us.” [*New York Times, ibid. The Salwen’s have shared their story in a book which will be out next month: “The Power of Half,” by Kevin Salwen and Hannah Salwen.*]

Where did we ever get the idea that service to others diminishes the quality of our lives, rather than enhancing it? Best selling author and Presbyterian minister Fredrick Buechner reminds us, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” I believe that meeting place will be full of surprises, clear purpose, and joy beyond imagining. Yes, we’re “only” human, but our humanity is indelibly marked by a need to serve, to find meaning and purpose in the blood, sweat, and tears of daily toil. When the Outreach Mission Council was discussing the Every Member a Minister campaign, someone suggested the tag line “Serves’em right!” But someone else spoke up right away to add “Serves US right!”

And in God’s gracious and glorious economy they’re both right! Welcome to this ministry! Thanks be to God!