

"Fear Not"

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Jeremiah 1:4-10

In this season of the liturgical year (after Epiphany and before Lent), the scriptures take us on a vocational journey. They reassure us that our identity and call to be children of God means we are never alone and that our lives are enriched and promoted by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit working in and through us. God creates and calls each of us for a purpose.

While reflecting on vocational calling, the historical church has grown in its understanding that God calls every Christian to live the radical gospel of Christ through faithful obedience. No matter what we do for a living, we are children of God first. For some, that faithful obedience may require grand speech, heroic measures, or world-changing actions. For others, it is in fulfilling the tasks of our social, political, and familial roles. For all, it is testifying to God's intentions for the world in the way we live our lives. Karl Barth, a Swiss theologian defined vocation as "the event in which persons are set and instituted in actual fellowship with Jesus Christ, namely, in the service of His prophecy... and therefore in the service of God and others." John Calvin assured, "No task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight." As Martin Luther famously said about parenthood, when understood as Christian vocation, "even changing dirty diapers is done for the glory of God!"

Today, we encounter a text sharing the vocational call of Jeremiah, who wasn't divinely called to change diapers (at least that we know of) but as a prophet to the nations. As we read this text, I would like to invite us to listen to what Jeremiah's initial response is to God's call, but ultimately, for how Jeremiah is ushered into a life of service to the Almighty, which is bigger and better than anything he could imagine.

### **Jeremiah 1:4-10**

**Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,**

**<sup>5</sup> "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." <sup>6</sup> Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord." <sup>9</sup> Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. <sup>10</sup> See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."**

The Word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

God tells Jeremiah, “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.” Now, if that is not divine calling, I don’t know what is. Ok, so I get that much; God calls and tells Jeremiah directly what it is he will do with his life. The part that gets me is Jeremiah’s response: Not me, for I am only a boy and don’t how to speak. We have heard something like this before haven’t we?

Jeremiah has become known as the “everyman’s prophet.” In line with hundreds and thousands of others who have heard God’s call, he initially resisted the call of God because he believed himself not up to the task. Jeremiah shows us that fear, anxiety, resistance, inadequacy, even resentment are understandable reactions to the call to represent God in the world. Jeremiah’s call story also shows us that these feelings do not disqualify us from serving God’s intentions. Neither our achievement nor our confidence qualifies us to answer the call of God. Instead, we learn that it is God who prepares us to live out the vocation for which we were created. The calling to serve and the capacity to fulfill that calling come from God.

Patsy Clairmont, in her 3 in 1 book “God Uses Cracked Pots, Normal Is Just a Setting on Your Dryer, and Under His Wings” shares an experience she titled “Leaning”.

Why, oh why did I ever say I would do this? Fear was bobsledding through my body, creating havoc in my breathing apparatus and digestive tract. My tummy was gurgling so loud people were turning around, trying to decide who was guilty of such distracting sounds. When they looked in my direction, I’d roll my eyes toward the lady on my right, then I’d give a slight smile, as if we shared a secret about her noisy anatomy.

I was speaking for a ladies’ retreat day to 250 women. I was only doing the book reviews, but I knew I was incompetent and would probably be incoherent by the time I crawled my way up on stage. I wasn’t sure of my name much less what was in the six books I was to review. I had notes, but they seemed so small now. My eyes didn’t seem capable of focusing. Maybe I needed a doctor. Yes, that’s it... a doctor. I was way overdue for a physical. This seemed like a good time, so I stood to leave.

My friend Joyce had been observing my twitchy behavior and sensed I was bolting to run. She grabbed my arm, stuck a postcard in my face and said with authority, “Read this.” I wasn’t in a reading mood, but something in her voice made me do it anyway. Still struggling with my eyes and concentration, the only thing I could make out was the title of what appeared to be a poem. It was called, “Lean Hard on Me.” The title was enough. I made an about face and headed for the platform. I kept repeating “Lean hard on Him, lean hard on Him.” And I was. Had you been standing in the back watching me walk to the front, I’m sure I would have been at a thirty-degree angle I was leaning so hard. I was now at the front row, and my friend Rose was announcing the book reviews. My name is Patsy Clairmont but she introduced me as Klutzy Paramount. Well, the audience got almost hysterical over the slip.

Being inexperienced on stage, I didn't know what one should do when the audience was in gales of laughter at your name. I walked up the steps and started across the stage. When they saw me, they laughed harder. I'm not sure if they were agreeing the name fit my appearance or what. As the hilarity began to subside, I leaned into the microphone and said, "My name is..." but before I could set the record straight, they were off in riotous laughter once again. When they took a breath, I rattled off my reviews and retreated... relieved and rejoicing. She concludes her reflection with a question: Are you leaving or leaning?

The good news of God's word, especially when addressing our vocational calling, is this: **Fear not**. Lean hard on me. You are my beloved child and in you I have instilled everything you need to be who I have created and called you to be. You are enough because I am with you and will be with you always; when you think you are too young and can't speak, when you are on stage and your name is mispronounced, when others can't stop laughing, when your nerves are about to shake out of your skin and you fear your next task; when your doubt is enough to make you run.

There are 365 "Fear Nots" in scripture. It is the bible's most frequent commandment. One for every day of the year. Coincidence? I have shared with you before that with God, I don't believe in coincidences. So, if it is not an anomaly, then what? Why does God need to remind humanity so often to "fear not?"

Fear makes humanity believe the worst. Fear cripples and immobilizes us. "Excessive fear is when we allow the avoidance of evil to trump the pursuit of the good... our overwhelming fears need to be overwhelmed by bigger and better things (Scott Bader-Saye)."

God is not defined by fear and all it carries with it. It is God's hope for us, as God's children, to be free of fear so we can be free to be who God needs us to be. God's "Fear not" is an offer of salvation and a promise of protection. For Jeremiah, God's promise was to shade or guard him. As a young boy, God knew exactly what Jeremiah needed to succeed. Just like Jeremiah, God knows exactly what we need and when for us to be successful in fulfilling our vocation. The way we take fear out of living is to put our faith in the Lord; lean hard on Him. Faith in God gives us solid ground to stand on. Faith in God gives us peace that passes all understanding. Faith in God gives us eternal hope. Faith in God gives us clarity of purpose.

Christian calling is not just reserved for those asked to do mighty things. It is the invitation to every Christian to witness to the gospel by investing with radical grace whatever worldly roles God opens to us. Our individual response to God's call should be... Here I am! Brothers and sisters in Christ, let's live in faith, not fear. Whatever it is God has put in front of you to do. Whoever it is God is calling you to be today. God is behind you, before you, in you, with you, around you, and for you. Do not be afraid! Do not fear! Fear Not!