

What if – Part 2

Whether through the complicated process of socialization or good manners or simple maturity, somehow we learn how to respond appropriately to particular phrases in particular settings. “Paper or Plastic?” “Cash or credit?” or for those of us older folks in the room, “Smoking or non-smoking?” We negotiate and navigate our lives by knowing what to say and when to say it:

“The peace of Christ be with you.” And also with you.

Excuse me. Please. Thank you. You’re welcome.

I love you. I love you too.

I’m sorry. It’s okay.

Lift up your hearts. We lift them up to our God.

What kind of dressing would you like for your salad?

I’m fine, how are you?

We learn the responses, the right answers and then that knowledge provides us a shield of comfort and confidence as we go through life because we know what to say and what to do.

At work or play, home or school or church or wherever, we learn the specific languages and the peculiar vocabularies. We learn what is effective, authoritative, cool, popular, funny, acceptable. We learn what to say and we learn what cannot be said.

As we master the codes for proper behavior in these different contexts, we file this information alongside our passwords and PIN numbers and create for ourselves a sort of security blanket, a safe zone where we live and move and have our being. It’s a zone in which all is pretty predictable, pretty comfortable and pretty enjoyable. We like knowing what to say and when to say it, don’t we?

But what do you do when something comes along that you’re not prepared for? What do you do when something dislodges you from your comfort zone? What do you do when you are addressed in such a way that you don’t immediately and confidently know the answer? Something so unusual, so unpredictable, so unfamiliar that you don’t have a handy response?

In other words, what do you do when God calls you? Because it seems to me that God’s call will most likely come to us in unexpected ways, cast in tones that are disruptive and disturbing to our carefully crafted worlds. And make no mistake, God calls each one of us, and it doesn’t necessarily mean ordained ministry either.

When I answered God’s call, I had been working at the post office for four years and making a lot of money, but God’s call kept coming and coming until I could no longer say no. God’s call isn’t going to fit easily into what we are already doing; it’s not going to slide neatly into the patterns and codes that we already have learned. Just ask Jeremiah.

God makes a strong opening bid in our scripture for this morning, pronouncing a divine claim on Jeremiah's life before he had even been born. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you," God says to Jeremiah... "I appointed you to be a prophet to the nations."

How's that for a word from outside the comfort zone? Nothing in his life could have prepared Jeremiah for this word because it is a word from beyond and before his life even began. It is a call that is unexpected in every sense. Unfamiliar, disorienting, destabilizing.

As Jeremiah struggles to put this extraordinary word from God into some kind of framework, he begins to protest. "But God! I don't know how." That is something I say all the time. Maybe you have said it too.

"God, I don't know how to do what you are calling me to do. Nothing in my life has equipped me for this task. What you are asking of me doesn't fit into what I'm doing now. I am unable to categorize it, make sense of it, or understand how it is possible for me to do it.

As Jeremiah voices his protest to God, Jeremiah lists his inadequacies. I don't know how to speak! I'm too young!" Jeremiah thinks he is limited by his skills and by his age, by who he is and by what he can do. Jeremiah is convinced that he is not qualified to be a prophet to the nations. He is sure of it. "I'm not very old and I'm not much of a speaker, so God, you should be looking for someone else."

But God's not buying it because God knows that Jeremiah is qualified for this task. Jeremiah is indeed able to do this work – not because of who Jeremiah is, not on the basis of what Jeremiah can do, not because Jeremiah knows all the answers and has all the right words. None of that matters.

Instead, Jeremiah is qualified because of who God is. Jeremiah is able because God is able. God's faithfulness empowers and equips us to respond to God's call. Left on his own, Jeremiah could never do this work. He is too young and too poor a speaker. Left on his own, left behind his shield of familiarity, within his comfort zone, Jeremiah could never respond to God's call. But God's point in speaking this word is that Jeremiah will not be left on his own. "I'll show you where to go," God says. "I'll tell you what to say and I will be with you." God does not call people and then leave them! God does not call you and then abandon you. God's faithfulness empowers and equips us to respond to God's call.

So lack of ability is no excuse. And age isn't either. Just as Jeremiah is not too young to do God's work neither is a teenager. Let me tell you about a teenager named Andy that lives in New York City. He is the oldest of several children. He lives in a tough neighborhood. Drugs and gangs and guns are regular features in his environment. Andy tells how he sometimes dodges bullets on his way to his girlfriend's house. He worries about the safety of his younger brothers and sisters. He struggles to be a Christian in the violent place where he lives. Any believes God has called him to be a witness of peace but it's understandably hard for him to do when those he loves become victims.

Andy can't respond to God's call on his own. He's just not qualified. Nonviolence is not within his comfort zone; nonviolence is not a response that has been conditioned to him. Yet Andy is finding that

he can do it, he can live peacefully, because the one who has called him to that life has also promised to be with him in all things. God is strengthening Andy to live the life that God has called him to.

Maybe God has been speaking a word to you, maybe God is calling you in a way that you can hardly believe because it doesn't fit neatly into the categories of your life. Maybe it's unfamiliar, disorienting, destabilizing and you don't know how to respond. Maybe it's a call to change your life, to take a different job, to accept a new position of service or leadership. Maybe it's a call to restore a relationship, to set new priorities, to suggest a fresh approach.

God calls Jeremiah "to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and to overthrow. Maybe God is calling you to something similar, to dismantling a structure that doesn't work very well, plucking up and pulling down an outmoded way of doing things. Sometimes, something old has to come down before something new can go up.

For example, the wall in Berlin had to come down before democracy could take hold in Eastern Europe. Another example is only when an alcoholic admits their addiction, only when they start the process of tearing down the addicted self by naming it for what it is, only then can they begin constructing a new life.

In our lives, our community, our nation, there is no shortage of things that need to be plucked up and pulled down. There are even things that need to be destroyed and overthrown. An attitude, a program, a system, a practice, a prejudice, a habit, a value.

Maybe you are being called to be a voice for change, an agent of plucking up and pulling down, of destroying and overthrowing. You won't know how to respond to that call and you won't feel qualified to enact that call. But if you are willing, God is willing. And then there's no limit to what God can accomplish through you.

God's word to Jeremiah though is not just to tear down; it is also a call to build up. Maybe that is what God is calling you to do. To start something new, to advocate a fresh approach, to put forward a different perspective. Soon, we will begin the work of visioning for this congregation's future and what we could do for our surrounding community. I wonder what God is calling us to do as a congregation. I do know that it will be beyond our comfort zones, and I'm pretty sure that we aren't well equipped to do such work on our own. But can we muster enough faith to trust God's ability to bring forth new things?

What might God be calling you to build or to plant? Like me, you won't know how to respond to that call and you won't feel qualified to enact that call. But if we are willing, God is willing. And then there's not limit to what God can accomplish through us.

If we are willing. Maybe that's what it comes down to in the end. Maybe nothing much can happen until we are willing to step out in faith, to move outside of our comfort zones, to drop those shields of safety and confidence. Maybe God's greatest act is simply persuading us to trust that God is the power and the presence in, with, and through what God calls us to do.

Maybe the hardest thing for God is getting us to realize that we can respond to God's call not because of who we are and what we know, but because of who God is. We are able because God is able.

How many of us struggle to believe that we are powerful, capable and necessary? Our scripture invites us to remember: God has known us since before we were born, longer than we have consciously known ourselves. Our strengths, our weaknesses, our place in the middle of systemic realities and cultural norms. God knows all this, and still, promises, we have everything we need inside of us to follow the calls God has placed on our lives.

There's no guarantee there will not be losses or barriers or attempts to destroy, but it is the assurance that we are made for the work God created us to do. We are not all called to the same tasks or roles but we are all called to use our gifts and insights and capabilities for the lifting up of our communities and our neighbors and the world at large.

What are the barriers that keep us from believing we are not capable of doing that – capable in terms of what we have within us or that might be held against us? God offers us a rebuttal to those voices within or to the prejudices around?

We are crafted from the very womb of God. Formed by the forces of Love and Creation and Wonder and Passion. We are capable of so much more than we can imagine. Today's lesson is a call to rise up, to face that which terrifies us, and to live out the challenging work that God has called us to.

Marianne Williamson said this: "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate, our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

What if we harnessed that? What if? What more might we be capable of if we could free ourselves from believing that we aren't powerful? Don't allow others to define who you are? Don't dismiss yourself. Continue to ask that powerful question – what if? What if I answered God's call on my life. Try saying "Yes." It will change you and it will change the world. Amen.