

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY | FEBRUARY 2, 2025
JEREMIAH 1:4-10 | PSALM 71:1-6 | I CORINTHIANS 13:1-13 | LUKE 4:21-30

“If only God would tell me what to do.” Many of us have thought or even voiced that complaint at various points in our life. Which career path to take. Which treatment to select. Which relationship to pursue. If only God would tell me what I’m supposed to do, we think, I would gladly go ahead and do it.

This is not the way things work in the Hebrew Bible. Case in point is the prophet Jeremiah. No matter what was happening in the world, Jeremiah had something to say about it. At times, he could be critical of the people around him and their indifference to their neighbors. But he could also be encouraging and hopeful about the future. Jeremiah was a man for all seasons.

We might assume that such a figure would come on the scene ready to make a difference. But it was actually just the opposite.

Here’s how Jeremiah tells it. “Now the word of the LORD came to me saying... ‘I [have] appointed you a prophet to the nations.’” This is the thing that we think we want. Clarity of purpose. Singleness of mind. A life of meaning. Sign me up.

But is it what Jeremiah wants? No. Not at all. Then Jeremiah said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” The key word here is “only.” We don’t know much about Jeremiah yet, but we know right away that he is a minimizer. After all, Jeremiah was not a boy. He was a twenty-something-year-old man.

But Jeremiah takes what he has to offer and writes it off. Jeremiah doesn’t refuse the call because he thinks it’s unimportant. He doesn’t say it’s not what he’s interested in. Instead, he says that he isn’t up to the challenge. Jeremiah is always rounding down whatever skills and gifts he might possess. And so he hears the call of God and just wants to sit this one out.

And many of us are minimizers, too. When we take stock of ourselves or others, we use words like “only,” “just,” “barely,” or “hardly.” These might be designations that we apply to ourselves. I’m *only* a kid. I *just* started doing this. Or they may be ways that we view others. They *barely* got accepted. They *hardly* know anyone.

Perhaps Jeremiah was just displaying some midwestern modesty. But it’s more universal than that. We often feel like we’re not up to the task. There must be someone else who is smarter or wiser or stronger or more eloquent who can do it. Why has God suddenly placed this holy calling on my life?

But this is rather different from how God thinks of it. God doesn’t say, “I’m choosing you to be a prophet because I think you’re the best candidate for the job.” God says, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.” Consecrating something means to make it holy. So before you were even born, God says, I made you holy. I made you a part of my story and the story of my people.

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Jeremiah looks at his life and minimizes it. Just a boy. Barely able to speak. Hardly up for the demands of this calling. But God looks at his life and maximizes it. Your entire life has been part of my story. Your entire life been leading you up to this moment.

In some ways, God and Jeremiah are arguing past each other here. Jeremiah wants to have a conversation about whether he's the best person for the job. For Jeremiah the question is *Am I really the person that God needs?* And, you know, maybe, maybe not. But that's not the real question. But the question God wants to talk about is *Do you understand how much you're loved?*

Our egos want to be needed. To be told that people couldn't get by without us. That if we weren't here, they'd be in a pinch. Being needed feels good. But our souls want to be loved. To be promised that we're loved not because of what we do, but simply because of who we are. In other words, what Jeremiah wants is to feel indispensable. But instead, God tells him that he's irreplaceable.

That's what's at the heart of this call story. We, like Jeremiah, are often so anxious about whether we are up to the call. Nervous that we might make the wrong choice somewhere along the line and make a mess of it. But God reminds him that he can't choose his way out of God's love. That's what empowers Jeremiah's ministry. It isn't just the words God puts in his mouth. It's that assurance that God has been holding him his entire life and will continue to hold him into the future.

When Martin Luther used to say that you should "sin boldly," this is what he meant. You're never going to know with full confidence that you're making the right choices or speaking the right words or following the right path or doing things the right way. Even if you try your best, you'll still mess up sometimes. I know I do. God doesn't give us a road map for every decision we make.

But God promises us that we are loved, forgiven, and healed even in the middle of all that uncertainty. You're going to sin, in other words, so you might as well sin boldly. Make your reverent best guess at how God wants you to love your neighbor. And then go get out there and get on with it, trusting that God is with you along the way.

You may see yourself as "just" this or "only" that. But God sees you as so much more. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks once put it, God "believes in us more than we believe in ourselves."¹

Like Jeremiah, your life has been consecrated and made holy. Don't waste your time minimizing your gifts and doubting if you're really needed. Rejoice, instead, that you're truly loved.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

¹ Jonathan Sacks, "Strength from Faith Is God's Faith in Us," *The Times*, October 13, 2012.