

Call and response: Jeremiah 1:4-10; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

by [Bruce G. Epperly](#) in the [January 26, 2010](#) issue

In his book *Open Secrets*, Richard Lischer describes his response to the challenges of his first congregational call. “My congregants were expected to welcome an inexperienced 28-year-old stranger into a community as tightly sealed as a jar of canned pickles. The church had decreed that henceforth I would be spiritual guide, public teacher, and beloved sage with a stroke of a wand. God—or the bishop—had just made me an expert in troubled marriages, alcoholism, teen sex, and farm subsidies.”

Jeremiah felt a similar dissonance between the enormity of God’s call and his modest experience. “I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy,” he claimed. Sometimes when I come to the pulpit, I ask the same question. How can I share God’s wisdom with this congregation when today I have so little wisdom myself? How can I say anything meaningful or definitive about God when I know that our planet is just a speck in a universe of 100 billion galaxies, emerging over 14 billion years?

While such questions can paralyze pastor and layperson alike, our questions and sense of inadequacy may also be signs of faithfulness and spiritual well-being. In the biblical tradition, one mark of an authentic prophet is a protest of inadequacy when she or he is called to speak words on behalf of God. People don’t run for prophetic leadership as they do for public office; they are called, often against their will, to speak on God’s behalf in challenging situations. We see the examples throughout the Bible: Jeremiah protests his youth; Jonah tries to hide. Peter denies knowing the Messenger; Paul has to make an about-face before acknowledging his call to speak for God in Christ.

Later this same apostle Paul reminds us that we “see in a mirror dimly.” While virtually everyone knows the qualities of love described in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a, few readers get as far as verses 9-13, which portray the agnosticism of love; that is, that although we pretend to know all about those we love and serve, we in fact “know only in part.” We love our spouses, partners, friends and those we serve in spite of our partial understanding. This agnosticism is a gift, a good thing, for when

we think we fully know others or assume to know what's best for them, we are on the verge of objectifying or manipulating them.

In truth the other is always a mystery, and the most mysterious Other is the God of whom we speak and preach. To acknowledge that we “prophesy in part” is the first step in honest spiritual leadership and the primary antidote to religious idolatry, intolerance and fanaticism.

When Jesus proclaimed the words of the prophet Isaiah to his hometown congregation, his listeners believed that they had him figured out; they also thought they had *God* figured out. They believed that they knew all about God, and about the scope and limits of God's love. When Jesus describes God's care for foreigners and enemies, they try to kill him. Hometown boy or not, Jesus violates the theological mores that were at the heart of his neighbors' faith. That day, the crowd at Nazareth needed a good dose of agnosticism!

Healthy theology knows its limits. While we can affirm the truths of our faith, we must also recognize the relativity of our most important doctrines. I believe that the creative interplay of truth and limitation found in the contrast of cataphatic and apophatic spirituality is essential to a healthy and growing faith. On the one hand, if God is truly omnipresent, then God is moving through our lives and inspiring us in every encounter. God speaks through prophets and preachers, but also through children and laypeople. Each one is touched by God and can accordingly experience and describe her or his encounter with God. When I feel inspired in the writing of a book or sermon, I can legitimately give thanks for God's movements in my own creativity. But on the other hand, God is beyond description; the God of 100 billion galaxies is more than we can fully fathom. Accordingly, even my most inspirational theological or spiritual writing is limited, finite and imperfect. This interplay of cataphatic and apophatic is good news for writers, preachers and listeners alike: we can experience God and discover our life's vocation, but our vocation and encounter with God is always concrete, localized and limited—and *growing*.

When author Madeleine L'Engle was asked, “Do you believe in God without any doubts?” she replied, “I believe in God with all my doubts.” We see in a mirror dimly, but what we see is important. We have treasures in our congregational traditions and doctrinal understandings, but they are mediated through earthen vessels.

Jeremiah is a good model for us. Like Jeremiah, we are the recipients of a calling and a blessing, and we need to embrace God's call in our lives. This good news applies to

every congregant, as well as to those who have no contact with the church. Like Jeremiah, we need to temper our spiritual experiences and vocational gifts with the recognition that others are experiencing God in different ways and may have experiences and vocations that differ from our own. We can claim God's promise that God will always be with us as we share our faith in word and deed even as God calls us to humility and agnosticism in the sharing of the spiritual gifts we've received.