

Expect a call: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:21-30

Sunday's Coming Premium

January 9, 2007

When I run across texts like these from Jeremiah and Luke, I'm always asking, "What kind of community does it take to raise prophets like Jeremiah and even Jesus?" Being a Baptist, I have few doubts about God calling prophets, preachers, missionaries and everyday Christians. The call of God tends to be very personal, but it is not private and does not come in a vacuum. It has long been customary for folks who feel called to something to stand up and give an accounting before the congregation to see if members concur that indeed, the person shows evidence of being called and that they too sense God's call for that person. The very expectation of a call helps prepare the way and contributes to being called.

That being said, it seems that we don't have as many people being called these days. It's true that our churches have changed. Conservative churches have their rigid Bible views and preachers-with-all-of-the-power, not leaving much room for God to reach down and grab some unsuspecting young person or layperson by the nape of the neck and thrust him or her into "the call." At the same time, progressive or liberal churches might not be so sure that it is God calling. Might it not be hormones or an overly active imagination or even some sort of psychosis?

I was only seven or eight when one of our small-town West Texas heroes came home from Vietnam. He had lived three doors down from me, was a star on the high school football team, and had been in my father's Sunday school class before going off to Vietnam. He came back with one leg and a message. God told him, he said, that the war was wrong and that our church and our town needed to change our minds and hearts about racial segregation. Since he was never given the opportunity to stand in the pulpit and testify, he prophesied in casual conversation, but the results were the same: everyone talked about what he said, what had happened to him over there, and whether or not the war had messed up his head. One Sunday after church, my father commented to my mother that perhaps the boy had some mental problems from Vietnam, but that didn't mean that what he said was wrong. Soon my father, as a member of the local school board, began pushing for our schools to be

integrated.

Though that young Vietnam veteran never considered himself a prophet, I've come to believe that he was. And although our church didn't know what to do with him, he was formed by its members and taught from the nursery on up that God speaks and God calls, and that our job is to "trust and obey, for there's no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey."

Luke says that when young Jesus came home to preach his first sermon, everyone in the congregation made a to-do over how well he did and how nice he looked. Surely he was on the fast track to being a successful rabbi with a large following. Then, of course, he ruined it all by talking of how God used widows at Zarephath and Syrian lepers. That made everyone mad. His career took a downturn and never recovered. In fact, he ended up being crucified on a cross while his hometown people just shook their heads.

A veteran Christian who was an old social activist told me that if you preach and live out the prophetic call of God, "You had better look good on wood because that is where you will end up." As I gaze upon the children and young people in our church as we teach them that God speaks and calls and that they need to "trust and obey," I remember the activist's words and cringe with fear. Do I want to form youth in the faith so much that they'll be like Jeremiah and perhaps even Jesus? I don't want our children to suffer, so am I going to be ready when they come home and tell us the truth and we don't like it?

Two years ago we had a tall, gangly, self-conscious seventh-grade girl in my congregation who was on the junior high girls' track team. A Saturday track meet was postponed to the next Saturday—when our church had scheduled a mini-mission trip that the girl had signed up for. She went to her track coach and told him about the conflict. When he told her, "Your teammates are counting on you and you can't let them down. I expect you here for the meet," she went home in tears. The next day she talked to him again; he responded, "You are either here for the meet or you turn in your uniform." More tears from her that night. She went to him a third time, handed him her uniform and walked away.

I've wondered about responses to this incident. A lot of people would have wanted to go whip the coach (the standard Texas response), and conservatives would have wanted to take over the school board and outlaw any school functions that conflict

with church events. What happened was that many of my parents were upset but willing to go along with the coach. So they were surprised and even shocked when the girl said, "This is about God." Their own teenage girl was choosing God and church over her track team, and we were surprised even though that was the way we raised her.

I know, I know—the track team is not like race relations, standing up against the war, or ending up on a cross. But prophets all start somewhere.