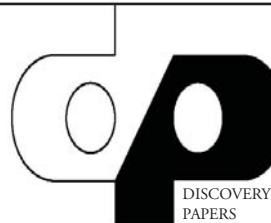


WHAT DOES GOD WANT FROM ME?

SERIES: WEeping IN WORSHIP



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Jeremiah 1:4-10
2nd Message
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Susan Boyle doesn't look like the typical *American Idol* contestant. When she appeared on *Britain's Got Talent*, the British version of *American Idol*, the judges and crowd literally laughed at her. But when she sang, her performance stunned them all. Afterward, one of the judges said that he was giving her the strongest recommendation he had ever given a contestant. In the two weeks following her appearance on the show, the video of her performance was viewed over 50 million times on YouTube. Why does Susan Boyle fascinate us so? Why has this particular performance drawn so much attention?

I think it's because we are all familiar with battling what other people think of us and letting other people tell us who we are, so when we see someone who knows who she is and doesn't let others define her, it is nothing short of inspiring. We love it when people are strong enough to stand up when people are laughing at them because we all want to be that strong. We want to know who we are and not let anyone challenge that.

Today we'll be looking at Jeremiah 1:4-10 as God tells Jeremiah what he should do – what he wants from him. Last week I introduced several of the major themes of Jeremiah and pointed out that each of these messages dealt with a significant issue of practical theology as lived out by this particular prophet. The topic that rises to the surface today is the issue of *calling*. We want to learn about our own calling, so we're going to read this as a story, watching the action unfold as we go. We will see that God was very specific with what he wanted from Jeremiah, and we'll see if we can draw some conclusions, based on how God interacted with Jeremiah, that help us to know how God interacts with us and what he wants from us.

Now, you may not be asking questions about who you are. Your life may feel pretty defined already. But it is possible that you don't ask these types of questions because you are too busy with the various activities that fill your life, and those activities may or may not fit with living in relationship with God. For some of us, staying busy is a way to avoid thinking about who we are and what we are doing. If you think that might describe you, then I invite you to make this a time to stop and consider whether what you're doing fits with how God has called us to live in this world.

The Characters

If you've ever read a book or watched a movie, you know that most narratives begin by introducing you to the characters. This one is no different. Verses 4-5:

The word of the LORD came to me, saying,

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”

It's appropriate that the first character to be introduced is God. The first few words of verse 4 introduce God through the Hebrew phrase *Davar-Adonai*. That's translated as “the word of YHWH” or “the word of God.” And this *davar-adonai* is a major feature of the book of Jeremiah. The phrase occurs in almost 5% of the verses of Jeremiah. That means that 1 out of every 20 verses in this book reminds us that this is the Word of YHWH. So God is the first character that is introduced. His word begins the story.

And what we know from Scripture is that God always begins the story. He always makes the first move. Have you ever had friends that you really enjoy being around, but you feel like you're always the one that has to initiate? They never call you; you always have to call them. You always have to come up with ways to hang out together. Well, it's not that way with God. God is the ultimate initiator. He initiates and we respond. Our lives are lived as a response to God. And here we have our first realization about our calling, about who we are. Our calling begins with God.

In the same verse, we have our second character introduced: Jeremiah. God doesn't just initiate with the world; he initiates with individuals. He initiates with you. Personally. Here his Word comes to Jeremiah. So now we have two characters: God and Jeremiah. But we don't just have two characters; we have a relationship. God speaks to Jeremiah, and we'll see that it is up to Jeremiah to respond. This relationship is the backdrop against which the story of Jeremiah's call is told.

So right here at the beginning, I want us to notice this relationship. Notice that God's word came *to* Jeremiah before it came *through* Jeremiah. This whole calling thing apparently starts with our relationship with God. That relationship is expanded upon when we get to verse 5. God says that he knew Jeremiah before he was conceived. He had picked him out for his calling before birth. So what we realize is that God knows us before we know him. God knew you before you knew him. Whether you are a Christian or not, whether you believe in this God yet or not, the truth is that he knows you and he has always known you. Our lives are lived as a response to his knowledge of us. Hopefully we are moving toward knowing him more.

But this story isn't just about us and God. At the end of verse 5, we get introduced to the third character in this story, and this one comes as a bit of a surprise. Most good stories have an unexpected character, and this is no

exception. The end of verse 5 reveals that God appointed Jeremiah as a “prophet to the nations.” Now, it’s no surprise that Jeremiah is appointed as a prophet. That’s expected. But it was somewhat rare to be a prophet to the nations. We expect him to be a prophet to Israel, but his calling is wider. He is a prophet to the nations: Babylon, Egypt, Edom—all of them.

So now we have the three characters that form the basis for this story. God, Jeremiah, and the nations. Already there is a little bit of tension here because of the surprise of the nations. The tension will build in the next few verses, but I want to stop for a moment and reflect on these characters.

We said we were going to be talking about what God wants from us today - how we define ourselves - that big question of who we are and what our place in the world is. As we consider that question, there really are three characters that come into play for us as well. And they are the same three characters that come into play for Jeremiah. Whether we acknowledge him or not, God is the first character in each of our lives. We, of course, are one of the characters in the story of our lives. And others make up the final character. That category includes your parents, siblings, teachers, pastors, peers, bosses, coworkers, spouses, children, et cetera—anyone who plays a role in your story. So the three main characters in your life are God, you, and others.

Notice how these three characters are arranged in Jeremiah’s calling. We’ve already seen that calling begins with God. But now we see how it includes him and ends up with other people. Did you get that? Jeremiah’s calling begins with God, it moves through him, and it leads him to other people; they are the end point for his calling. And I want to suggest to you that this is a pattern for our own calling, for our own purpose in life. Our calling, our identity, our purpose begins with God, it moves through who we are, and it leads us to impact the lives of others. Our calling leads us to others.

Now, think for a moment about these three characters—God, yourself, and others—and how you let each of them define who you are. I was at Stanford this week, and I walked past a display about people discovering their identity. They had huge posterboards with a person’s picture on it and some reflections about how they were coming to understand their identity. One of them in particular dealt with a lot of the ideas we’re talking about. Listen to how one person understands his identity:

“To me, the greatest barrier to discovering my identity has been myself. I’ve too often looked to others’ definitions of what it means to be ‘Asian,’ ‘Filipino,’ ‘male,’ ‘a fraternity member,’ etc. I’ve only recently realized that who I am and how I want to see myself is completely up to me.”

Did you catch that? “Who I am and how I want to see myself is completely up to me.” This person is wrestling with who he is. And he talks about two of the three characters we are talking about. He knows about others and he knows about himself. He has wrestled with letting

others define him. He realizes that isn’t right. So his only other option is that he must decide himself who he is. It’s completely up to him. And yet, it isn’t. That’s just not a true statement. It isn’t up to him to decide who his parents are, to decide what time in world history he lives, to decide his economic or ethnic or religious background. He can’t really define himself. That is one of the lies of our Western individually focused society. We can’t define ourselves.

But if you’re like me, then you often alternate between these two ways of determining yourself. Maybe you are like how this student ends up—deciding that who you are is completely up to you. Your identity begins with who you are and who you want to be. What are you good at? What are your strengths? What are you passionate about? Do you function as if your calling begins with you?

Or maybe you tend to let other people decide who you are. Maybe you look at the world and see all the needs out there and assume that the sole purpose for your existence is to meet the needs of other people, so you need to figure out how you can meet those needs. Or you start with the people close to you—parents, spouse, teachers—and you let them tell you who you should be. Do you function as if your calling begins with other people?

This passage in Jeremiah teaches us that our calling begins with God and leads us to other people. Susan Boyle didn’t let others define her. The student was trying not to let others define him. And we don’t let others tell us who we are either, but we also don’t define ourselves. God defines us. And that definition has to do our relationship with him and our interactions with the world.

What does that mean for you? How do you allow your calling to begin with God? Are you tempted to define yourself? Are you tempted to let others define you? The truth is that our abilities and our passions and the needs of others and the insight of our community all play a role in helping us to discover our calling. But too often we let those things determine our calling. What would it look like for you to let go of all that and let God tell you who you are? What it would look like to let your calling begin with God, involve you, and then lead you to other people?

The Problem

Well, let’s keep reading in Jeremiah’s story and see how things play out. Most good stories have a problem that has to get resolved as part of the story. That is what builds interest and carries you through the story. This one is no exception. Verse 6:

“Ah, Sovereign LORD,” I said, “I do not know how to speak; I am only a child.”

At the end of verse 5, God gives Jeremiah a basic understanding of his calling: he is to be a prophet to the nations. And in verse 6, we get to see Jeremiah’s initial response to this idea. And it isn’t great. He starts out basically stuttering, saying, “Well, uh, you see Lord God, there are a few, uh, things that you probably didn’t consider.” And Jeremiah goes on to list his two primary concerns that in

his mind disqualify him for the work that God seems to have planned for him.

The first concern has mostly to do with himself. He says that he can't speak. He doesn't have the ability to carry out this calling. He's not the right guy. He's just not equipped. The second concern has mostly to do with others. He says that he is too young, implying that they won't respect him or respond to him. Others won't listen to him. They won't want to know what I think. They won't let me be a prophet to them. So God calls Jeremiah. His calling starts with God moves through him and lands on other people. And Jeremiah says I'm not capable and they won't listen to someone this young.

So God initiates, and how does Jeremiah respond? He says no. Why? Because it doesn't sound like much fun. In fact, it sounds terrible. It's the job nobody wants, and he doesn't want anything to do with it.

So now we have another observation about calling. Our calling, what God wants from us in this life, usually starts out feeling like death. It feels like we are walking into a room of people who despise us, like we're stepping up to bat with a blindfold on, like we're being asked to do something that we are sure we just aren't qualified to do.

We notice this pattern throughout most of the Bible. Nearly all of the faithful people in the Bible had to start by walking through what looked like death to them. Abraham was too old to possibly have a child; God's promise just seemed like mockery. Joseph had to be sold into slavery. Moses didn't think he could talk. Isaiah didn't think he was good enough. Paul thought he'd be a great missionary to the Jews, but God sent him to the Gentiles. Throughout Scripture we find calls that begin with having to walk through something that looks completely impossible.

John Eldredge and Brent Curtis, in *The Sacred Romance*, say that when God gives us our part in the play, our first response is usually to ask for a smaller part or maybe even let us direct our own play somewhere Off-Broadway. We don't want the role that God has for us. It usually seems too scary.

So what about you? Stop for a moment and think about some uncertain decision you are facing. Does it center around you? Around your capabilities or lack thereof? Or perhaps it centers around other people—are you afraid you might disappoint someone—or lots of someones? Are you concerned about how you'll be perceived or whether anyone will listen to you? Does it feel like death? Well, this is the place that Jeremiah finds himself.

The Solution

God tells Jeremiah that he will end up being faithful, and he explains how he'll make it happen. Verses 7-9:

But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD. Then the

LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "Now, I have put my words in your mouth."

First, God addresses Jeremiah's concerns about being too young. Jeremiah is afraid of going to the nations; he's afraid of speaking to Israel because he is young and he is afraid of how they will respond to him. God responds in the way that he almost always does to this type of concern. He doesn't dismiss the fear. He doesn't criticize Jeremiah for being afraid. He promises that he will be with him. In response to Jeremiah's fear, God offers his presence. And God's presence is a powerful thing.

You see this with kids all the time. I see it in my own kids—they want someone with them when they are scared. And I remember it from when I was a kid. When I was young, my bedroom was on the second floor of our house and because I was the youngest, I would go to bed before my siblings and parents. But I hated being the only one upstairs while they were all downstairs. So I would usually make one of my parents stay up in their bedroom while I was falling asleep. The problem is that I could see down the hall from my bed, so I knew when they tried to slip away and sneak down the stairs. But this is just how most kids are. And most adults, too, if we care to admit it. When we are scared, we usually want someone with us. Presence takes away our fear. So that's what God promises. Jeremiah is afraid of how others will respond, so God says, "OK, I'll go with you."

Then he goes on to address Jeremiah's concern about speaking. Once again, it's a beautiful picture of God interacting with him very personally. Jeremiah complains that he doesn't have words, so God gives him words. The language is very personal. It's presented in slow motion. God stretches out his hand. He touches Jeremiah's mouth. And very gently he says, "I put my words in your mouth." Jeremiah complains that he doesn't know how to speak. So God gives him his own words. He puts the *davar-adonai* within him.

In response to Jeremiah's youth, God promises his presence. In response to Jeremiah's lack of ability, God gives Jeremiah the words to speak. All of this is an amazing picture of God overcoming Jeremiah's weakness. God told Jeremiah that he was going to be a prophet to the nations. And Jeremiah looked at himself and said "I don't think so." And he looked at the nations and said, "I don't think so." But God reached out and touched him and said, "You're looking in the wrong direction. This looks like death to you, but I'm going to make it life. I'll give you words. I'll be with you. Look at me."

So now we realize that our calling feels like death, but God brings life from that death. Our calling involves facing our fears, our insecurities, and our questions about how God can use us, and then looking at God and knowing that, when we go somewhere with him, we will experience life. Think about Jeremiah. Think about his insecurity and the complicated time in which he lived. And think about what God promised him: that he would go with him.

That's really what we all want, even if we're not aware of it; we want to experience the presence of God. And think about God reaching out to Jeremiah and putting his words into his life. God equipped him. And this is the other thing we want: to be significant, to play some role. We're mostly just afraid that we won't do a good job. And so, on the other side of death, Jeremiah experiences life, the kind of life all of us really want to have. Deep relationship. Meaning for our lives. God's presence. God's Word.

This is one of the main themes of the book of Jeremiah. It's the story of the gospel: God overcoming death by bringing forth life from it. Abraham ended up founding God's people. Joseph ended up saving his people from starving to death. Moses ended up winning the all time Most Valuable Prophet award. And Jesus, who walked through death so that he could rise again, ended up saving us.

This is what it feels like to follow God. This is how we experience our calling. We have to go through our own insecurities. We may have to face persecution or humiliation. It feels like death. But God does something, and that death gives way to life.

The Resolution

In a typical story, the characters are introduced, then a problem arises, then a solution to the problem is presented, and finally there is some sort of resolution where everything works out OK. Well, in the last verse of this section, we see a kind of resolution to Jeremiah's call. We get to find out some of the details of his particular calling and we learn something else about our own calling as well. Verse 10:

See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant."

One aspect of Jeremiah's calling that he is to have responsibility over nations and kingdoms. His is going to be a significant role in the course of history, as we will learn while we study this book. And God gives Jeremiah six words that describe the essence of his calling. In the NIV, those are translated as *uproot, tear down, destroy, overthrow, build, and plant*. Now we realize why Jeremiah was afraid to be a prophet to the nations. Messages from God to the nations usually involve judgment. Words like uproot, tear down, destroy, and overthrow are not words that we usually like to share with other people.

But the four words of disaster are followed by two words of hope. Jeremiah's job is not just to predict disaster but recovery as well. Even in Deuteronomy, God predicted that after his people disobeyed him they would be sent into exile. But he also predicted their return. Even there, hope was present. And so in these six words, we see the whole message. We see the message of disaster, but we see the message of hope as well.

And now we come to our final observation about calling. And it's a funny twist. It turns out that our calling brings us life from death. But our calling is also to offer

others life from death. What we experience is the same as what we offer others. That's why we're called witnesses. God asks him to preach death to the nations. Uprooting. Tearing down. Destroying. Overthrowing. But he says that death will give way to life. Building. Planting. This is God's message to the world: "I want you to experience life, but life comes through death. Life for you comes through the death of my son. It comes when you humble yourself before me and ask for forgiveness. It comes when you die to yourself and let me live in you." It's a message of life, but of life that is come to through the door of death.

And that's why our calling isn't the easiest thing in the world. People don't want to hear a message of life that comes through death. They want to hear a message of life that is easy and understandable and simple, of life that leads to life. But our message involves struggle. It's death that gives way to life. death that is overcome by life. This is Jeremiah's message: death is coming, but life will follow. And this is really the Christian message. This is the gospel. This is our story.

Conclusion

So this is who we are. We begin with God. He leads us to others. It feels like death. But that death gives way to life. And then we invite others into that experience.

Think back to Susan Boyle. She didn't let others tell her who she was. She knew who she was, and maybe her sense of calling from God—we don't know. But we do know that our culture's way of finding and defining yourself falls short. Whether we accept it or not, God defines us and has a calling for us.

God wants each of us to live in relationship with him so that we might bring life to others. That's why marriage is the most common picture of our relationship with God. They both involve two people entering into an intimate relationship with each other. And what happens when two people get really intimate? They create life for someone else. A child is the natural outcome of an intimate relationship between a man and woman. Life is born from intimacy. And that's what is born of our relationship with God: we bring life to others.

What I love about this notion of calling is that it is broad. You'll sometimes hear people say that the sole purpose for a Christian's life is evangelism. Well, that's actually not biblical. Evangelism is part of it, but so are family, vocation, and service. Our calling is to live in relationship with God in a way that brings life to others, and we bring life to others in a lot of ways through our jobs, our families, our everyday relationships with people.

Knowing what God wants from us won't answer all our questions. It doesn't give an answer to very specific decisions that we might be dealing with. But it does give us a framework for thinking about those decisions, and it invites us to come to God in prayer asking how he wants to work through our lives to impact others. Life is full of decisions. Many are difficult ones. As we make them, may

we live out our calling to be in relationship with God and allow that relationship to spill out into the lives of others. May we know that God goes with us and will equip us for whatever he asks us to do. And may that knowledge give us the courage to walk through death so that we might experience life and invite others to do the same.