



“Wunderkind”

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Jeremiah 1:4–10 (NRSV)***

Jeremiah was an unlikely prophet. By his own account, Jeremiah was the son of Hilkiah, a priest from Anathoth (Jer. 1:1), a village in the hill country located a day’s walk north of Jerusalem. He was from the smallest of the twelve tribes of Israel, the tribe of Benjamin, and was the descendent of a priest whom King Solomon had banished from Jerusalem because he had supported the king’s rival for the throne.¹

Young Jeremiah, like his forbears, was a thorn in the side of the ancient royals. He criticized the kings for worshipping foreign gods, and told them to reclaim the first commandment: I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other Gods before me.

He also criticized the Temple priests for emphasizing right ritual over social justice. He warned that unless the kings and priests repented of their sins, and adhered to the covenant that God made with Moses, Judah (the southern Jewish kingdom) would be ruined. (See Jer. 7 & 8.)

The way that biblical historians remember the events that unfolded during Jeremiah’s life, the kings and priests failed to repent and the nation was ruined. Israel (the Northern Kingdom) was divided by the Assyrians, and Judah (the Southern Kingdom) was conquered by the Babylonians, who defeated their army, leveled their capital and their Temple, and marched the survivors (including Jeremiah) back to Babylon where they spent forty years in captivity working as indentured servants.

Jeremiah was an unlikely prophet. He was from the wrong tribe and the wrong zip code, and he was the wrong age when he got the call to prophecy. And yet, God called Jeremiah to speak truth to power and tell the rich and famous the things that they did not want to hear. Later, in Babylon, Jeremiah was also called to comfort the exiles who could hardly be consoled.

Who would have wanted Jeremiah’s job?

Perhaps no one. Perhaps not even Jeremiah.

¹ Leo G. Perdue, “Introduction to Jeremiah” in *The Harper Collins Study Bible, NRSV* (Harper Collins: New York City, 1993) p. 1110.

By his own account, Jeremiah tried to beg off. In verse five, he responded to God's call saying, "You've got to be kidding. I'm just a boy."

But God replied, "Your youth will not get you out of this gig. You will go where I send you, and say whatever I tell you to say. Don't be afraid, for I will deliver you."

The rest of chapter 1 and the rest of the book demonstrate just that—Jeremiah went where God sent him, and said what God told him to say, from the time he was twelve years old until the time of his death some fifty years later.

II

Those who are familiar with the pedigrees of the ancient prophets know that Jeremiah was a rarity, as one who was called in his youth. Jeremiah was what you might call a 6th century BC "wunderkind."

Wunderkind roughly translated from the German means "wonder child." Wunderkind is a term that we sometimes use in lieu of the English term "prodigy," meaning a child who is highly successful in a particular field such as music.

While there were other unlikely prophets in Ancient Israel—and part of the power of our faith history is that God calls people of every age and from all walks of life to be priests and prophets and disciples and apostles—Jeremiah was special in that he was called and claimed for prophetic ministry at a very young age.

The Bible illustrates that a few—but not many others—were called in their youth, including Samuel and David. Samuel was an Israelite Judge who lived and served in Israel before the monarchy was established. David is remembered as Israel's greatest king.

Both Samuel and David were called to leadership in their youth. Samuel heard God's voice in the night, and was helped by Eli to understand that God was calling him to be a Judge over Israel—instead of the sons of Eli—and even though he was only a child. David felt the inward call as a child to confront and conquer the giant, Goliath, even though virtually an entire army of full-grown men were either too frightened or ill-equipped to defeat their nation's adversary.

It's perhaps no accident that there are very few accounts in scripture of children being called to important ministries, and embracing those callings. Children had virtually no standing in the ancient Israelite community until, at least in the case of boys, they reached maturity. Children in biblical times were viewed much like adult women in society. They were virtually the property of their fathers and husbands.

How children were viewed in biblical times is very different from how we aspire to treat children in our time, so that it may be difficult for us to fully grasp the differences and,

therefore, how distinct was Jeremiah's calling and his embrace of that calling. But we must try to grasp these differences in order to appreciate the profundity of Jeremiah's life and witness.

In biblical times, most people did not see children as special individuals full of unique talents and gifts that needed to be nurtured. They did not think about different learning styles or giving children opportunities to explore their God-given gifts. Children were largely meant to be "seen and not heard," and children were expected to do what their parents or other adults told them to do without any comment. Children were valued, but two-thirds did not survive into adulthood. It was as children aged that their value increased in their parents' eyes, as they were able to add to the family workforce, and eventually to marry and produce children and to contribute to the well-being of the larger family and community.

Given the normative view of children in biblical times, it is especially significant that we note how God has called people of every age, in every time and place—including children like Jeremiah—to be prophets and apostles.

Six centuries after the death of Jeremiah, we see the value of children affirmed by Jesus. The gospels explain that people were bringing little children to him, and some of his followers tried to hold them back, but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."

These gospel accounts of Jesus' teaching about children remind us that in his eyes, and the eyes of God, we are all wunderkind. We are all wonder children. While we may not all be child prodigies, we are wonderful in the eyes of God, and each of us is given a particular calling by God.

The questions, then, are not *whether* we're called to ministry, but to *what* are we called even as children, and *how* do we as adults contribute (or not) to the vocational discernment processes of the children in our midst.

III

Think about your own life for a moment. Remember when you were about the age of twelve—the age at which Jeremiah was called to prophetic ministry. What was happening in your life? Did you have a sense of calling, a sense of purpose, a sense of passion awakening in your life? If so, was your call affirmed? And if yes, by whom?

In the United Church of Christ, we say that one has a particular calling when one's sense of inspiration is affirmed by one's faith community, so a calling is mutual experience involving an individual and their faith community.

In the case of ordained ministry, we say that one has a call to ordained ministry when that call is affirmed by a local church *and* the association in which one's church is a member.

I began to discern a call to ministry when I was fourteen years old. My call was inspired by a combination of the faith formation experiences that I was provided by the congregations that I had been associated with and by my extended family, particularly my grandmothers, and through the special relationship that I had with our church pastor, John Syster. John was particularly gifted youth minister, and he and his spouse, Kathy, took a special interest in my sister and me.

My inner sense of call was piqued by following John around like a little duckling, seeing what he did all day—especially outside of Sunday morning worship, and realizing what a difference he made in the lives of others. I'll never forget the day that I was riding with him in the van that my sister and I had helped him modify so that we could take it on youth group trips to far flung places like Maine and Colorado.

That day John was making house calls. Sometimes I went with him to visit people, especially homebound seniors, and sometimes I just sat in the van and waited for him, because he needed to have a private conversation with someone.

During the last visit that John made that particular summer day, I sat in the van while he counseled a new mother who was suffering from post-partum depression. He was in the house for 45 minutes to an hour, so I had quite a bit of time on my hands to think. (There were no iPods or cell phones or text messaging devices around then to entertain myself with.)

After John got back into the van, I said something like, "This is so cool what you do with your life."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

I said, "You help people. You help people recover from hard things, and you intervene in situations so that people's lives don't become as big of a mess as they might otherwise. Who else does that?" I said. "Nobody."

John said, "Yeah, it's a pretty cool job. There's nothing else quite like being a pastor. You could be a pastor, you know."

"No I couldn't," I said.

"Why not?" he queried.

"Because they don't let girls be ministers," I said.

"Maybe not in all denominations," John said. "But in the United Church of Christ, we have been ordaining women since 1851. Some of my best clergy friends are women, and I'm going to introduce you to some."

You know how that story ended. Now you know where it began.

IV

In the United Church of Christ, we say that one has a particular calling when one's sense of inspiration is affirmed by one's faith community, so a calling is a mutual experience involving an individual and their faith community.

Sadly, too often people even in our Protestant tradition think that only clergy have a calling to ministry. But such an understanding is not founded in scripture. Most of the callings described in scripture, including Jeremiah's, were to vocations other than pastoral ministry.

Writer and theologian Fredrick Buechner explained in his book, *Wishful Thinking*, "[That] the place God calls you to is where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

I've always been fond of Buechner's definition, because it rings true for the callings of both clergy and laity.

To borrow from Buechner, each of us is capable of a deep gladness, and each of us is capable of discerning "the world's deep hunger." Similarly, each child is a wonder child in God's eyes. And each of us, individually and collectively, is called and capable of awakening in our children a sense of wonder and awe, and affirming whether another's passion intersects with the world's need.

V

I don't know exactly how each of us is being called to awaken in our congregation's children a sense of wonder and awe, or exactly how God is tugging at their hearts or fanning the embers of their passions into flame. I just know that the potential is there, and that God is counting on us to play an important part in each one's faith formation and vocational discernment processes.

Exactly what role we play for each youth likely varies. Maybe we ask a question that demonstrates our interest in their lives, so that they know that others are invested in them. Maybe we affirm a gift that we see evidenced or that we hear shared with the congregation. Or maybe we simply give the gifts of time, patience, and a listening ear—in the midst of young person's sense of ambiguity, of not knowing—as they explore and test their own gifts and graces for ministry.

In these and other ways, I am sure that we say to the young people in our midst, "You are a wunderkind, a wonder child, a child of God, a child of this church, our child. You are fearfully and wonderfully made. Even if you have not yet discovered your purpose in life, we are sure that you have one. We know that your life matters. And what you have to offer the world is valued in the eyes of God and the eyes of your church." Amen.