

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, Epiphany 4C, 1/30/22, Jeremiah 1:4-10 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

In Epiphany, a season of signs and wonders, one theme we get to explore is call. Today we have the prophet Jeremiah's call story, which shares commonalities with other such stories like Moses, Samuel and Mary. These stories show that the initiative comes from God. God knew Jeremiah before God formed him in the womb and consecrated him before he was born. God appointed Jeremiah a prophet to the nations.

Call stories such as this make me remember one of my favorite sentences from scripture, "You did not choose me but I chose you." That's the first part of John 15:16, Jesus speaking to his disciples in the farewell discourse after the last supper. You did not choose me but I chose you. When I was briefly a Methodist in my 20s, that line was read as we came forward for communion, and those words unfailingly resonated: you did not choose me, but I chose you. They made me feel special. God had chosen me to be in that church at that time, and I was going to get a bit of bread because God had chosen *me*.

God chose Jeremiah, and me, and you.

If being chosen by God gives you pause, you're in good company. In today's reading, Jeremiah says: "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." Or think of Moses, who said "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." Or Mary, who said to the angel Gabriel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" Some kind of protest is normative in call stories.

So why didn't God pick more confident people? Why would God pick people who are only young or slow of speech?

I find "You did not choose me but I chose you" comforting but often wondered why, because I thrive on choices. Gary used to say that my favorite food is any combo plate, because I want to choose more than more than one thing. Here at church, I want us to choose whether we have wine or grape juice, and until two years ago we had several options for service times and style of music.

So why be grateful to God for choosing me instead of having me choose God? Why feel comforted by conscription instead of enlistment?

Jeremiah, as we will see in many readings this summer, was not called to a cushy prophetic ministry. Sometimes I have referred to him as the whining prophet, because he laments constantly. Which was his right, because he his job was to tell people over and over stuff they didn't want to hear. How the way they were treated others would lead to their destruction He was alive in an utterly miserable time, after the northern kingdom of Israel fell but before people in Judah were conquered and taken into exile in Babylon. People got sick of Jeremiah's pronouncements of doom and plotted to kill him. Eventually, of course, Jerusalem was conquered by Babylon, which did not make things better for Jeremiah. He wasn't happy because

he was right. No wonder he wasn't a particularly sunny guy. He didn't *want* the things he prophesied about to happen.

In Bible study last week we studied seven of the ten plagues of Egypt, and discussed whether we saw similarity to the times we're living in. Some have compared the current pandemic to a plague, for example, but overall those in Bible study felt like those particular had more definitive beginnings and endings, whereas the current pandemic seems to drag on indefinitely. Back in these ancient plagues, for example, there were frogs everywhere who then died and stank. All of the plagues took place in a shorter amount of time, we think, than this pandemic has, although the Bible isn't perfectly clear on that.

In Bible study, we agreed that even if the current pandemic is not quite a plague on the scale of the frogs and vermin, we loathe having to live in a time like this. I am frustrated out of my mind, and most of you are as well. I have no idea what's safe anymore. Guidance keeps changing. The Virginia Department of Health, for example, has stopped contact tracing because it's become unmanageable. Whenever we start to hear good news something else comes along: delta. Omicron. Sometimes I just want to crawl under this altar, so that I am still surrounded by the holy place but can hide.

That's when it makes sense that "you did not choose me but I chose you" comforts. We have all been *chosen* to be Christians during this difficult time. We are called to somehow hang together and minister together and show Jesus' love to a broken world, together. Together, even though sometimes we irritate and even infuriate each other with our different beliefs and approaches and risk tolerances.

Call stories have a pattern of a call and a protest, and then some sort of reassurance. In today's Old Testament reading, after Jeremiah protested, God touched Jeremiah's mouth with God's hand and said, "Now I have put words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

I'm comforted by God giving Jeremiah the words, and hope that God will send us the words we need to get through this time together.

I'm further comforted that the words God promises to give to Jeremiah aren't only words of destruction, but also words of building and planting. Last Sunday, I talked about how we need to focus on rebuilding in 2022. Today's our Annual Meeting, when three hardworking, exceptional vestry members—Hector, Amie, and Jay—will complete their terms, and three new people will be elected to replace them. While acknowledging present difficulties, we need to move forward, and this group of leaders will guide us so that together we will get through this time and pull other along toward the light.

How are you being called by God? What scares you about your call? What promises and words of comfort do you hear, and what words of comfort can you pass on to others?