

**“When God Calls You”**  
**A Sermon by the Rev. Marek P. Zabriskie**  
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I imagine that each of us carries around inside ourselves some significant questions about where we are going in our lives, and what we want to be and want to become.

As a child, I was often asked, “What do you want to do when you grow up?” When I was at seminary, I worked with undergraduates at Yale. When I asked them what they planned to do upon graduating and facing the job market for the first time, they often gave me tortured looks.

Dealing with important questions is one of life’s greatest tasks – questions about identity and vocation: Who am I? What am I going to do with my life? What will I become? These are some of the most important, hardest and frustrating questions to ask because many of us do not have clear and certain answers. Throughout our lives the questions continue.

“I’ve raised our children, and they are all off at college,” said a mother. “The house is so empty. I keep asking myself, ‘What am I to do with my life at this point? What is my purpose?’”

“I’m not in love with my job,” he said. “It pays the bills. I ride the train first thing in the morning and get home late. The work is intellectually challenging, but this is not what I want to do for the rest of my life. I want to make a change, but I’m not sure when and what I’ll do.”

“We recently retired,” she said. “We’ve both had very demanding jobs, and for the first time we can catch our breath and figure out what’s next. We’re asking ourselves what will it be?”

Our lesson from Jeremiah today speaks to us about vocation. The word “vocation” comes from the Latin word *vocare*, which means to call. A call necessitates a Caller, someone who calls us to do something with our lives, to become something that we currently are not. Our Old Testament lesson probes the mystery of what it means to be called into being and given gifts, time, talents, and energy to carry out a mission. The prophet Jeremiah said,

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

This text has always meant a great deal to me, because many years ago when I was taking a class called EfM, which many here have taken, I was asked to give a spiritual autobiography and when I entered the discernment process for the priesthood I had to repeat it many times. I found as I examined my life and thought about all the events that have taken place, the chance encounters, the books that I had read, the people whom I had met and the experiences that I had benefited from, it was like a string of pearls strung on a golden thread that started in the womb. I sensed that from the outset God created me to serve the world in this respect.

In this text, we see that Jeremiah's selection as prophet has nothing to do with his capabilities for the job, but is made prior to his exhibiting any prophetic abilities.

What is profound about this is the sense that God has created each of us with a plan or a calling in mind. Those of you who are parents and grandparents know how different your children can be and how quickly each of them manifests his or her unique gifts and personality. Our youngest daughter, Isabelle, was a mama's girl from the moment she left the womb, and she was born stubborn. Our entire family had to adapt to this beautiful, little, hard-headed treasure.

While God may have a calling for each of us, it is not a full-blown career plan. We are not born with a resume, nor does God clearly lay out what will occur in our future. Jesus at his baptism was given a supreme gift when God said, "You are my son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased." There are no more important words that a parent can ever repeat to a child. Nothing more was said, but that was certainly enough. Jesus was God's chosen agent for healing the world, but he had to work out what that meant on a daily basis.

The word "vocation" has unfortunately come to be associated almost completely with talk about careers. The Puritans placed such a focus on work that they often restricted our sense of vocation to work alone. This has left a smaller and smaller place in our lives for deep personal relationships with family and friends, our neighborhood and our church. In our workaholic culture where we may get so much of our identity from our work, we often do not know our neighbors and we run the risk of viewing our marriage, children and friendships as something extra to be worked on if there's time. My father worked so hard when I was a child that the way that I got to know him was to do yardwork at his side. Even his free time focused on work.

But the conviction at the heart of our faith is that God calls each one of us. Our problem, however, comes from figuring out what it means to listen and to "hear" the call of God. Part of the problem is sifting through all noise and voices around us and trying to figure out which is the voice of God as opposed to the voice of overbearing parents or a guidance counselor, coach, employer or our own fragile ego or anxious self-interest. There are voices that call out for us to settle for work that we don't really like in order to support our real lives on the weekend or on vacation. Sometimes, the hardest task is to hear the movement of God in our own soul.

We may wonder, if God has a clear plan for our lives, why does God keep it so cleverly hidden from us, as if it's up to us to guess and try to figure it. When he heard God's call, Jeremiah said:

"Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord."

Sometimes, we feel completely inadequate. When I sensed a call to enter the priesthood, I thought, "This won't possibly work. I'm terrified about speaking in public. I've never been a leader. My life is no moral model." Even in seminary, I remember standing outside the chapel at Yale Divinity School and looking across the quadrangle and wondering, "Why me, O Lord?" I felt so unworthy and unequipped to serve God and the Church. But Jeremiah reminds us that fear, anxiety, inadequacy, resistance and even resentment do not disqualify us from serving God. In his book *Listen to Your Life* Parker Palmer writes:

Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. Before I can tell my life what I want to do, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I must live – but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life.

A call is therefore discerned from within and also through the community around us, by listening to what is deepest inside ourselves and by listening to those who know us best. A calling is ultimately always about service. We were created God's image, and God is a servant. Jesus tells us that he came not to be served but to serve. Whenever we discover the service aspect in our lives, we discover our purpose, significance, deepest meaning and greatest joy. William Sloane Coffin said:

A career seeks to be successful, a calling to be valuable. A career tries to make money, a calling tries to make a difference.

A calling therefore demands humility. It attempts to serve others and add value to society. I can think of no time in recent history when we so need leaders to model an ethic of humble service. Jesus said, "Whoever wishes to be great must be your servant..." I think of Thomas Jefferson on the day that he was inaugurated. The White House had not yet been completed, and following the inauguration Jefferson walked to his boarding house. He got to it late, and people were already seated for dinner. There was no place for him to sit. Jefferson had just been sworn in as President of the United States, but he did not create a storm or have somebody kicked out of his seat. Rather, Jefferson sat quietly at the side until someone had finished. To have a call is serve with humility. That's what we wish for every child baptized and each youth raised at Christ Church.

And so we must ask ourselves, "What is my unique, one-on-a-kind constellation of experiences, gifts, abilities and passions? This points us to our vocation.

Let me close with words from John Henry Newman, the great Anglican priest who later became a Roman Catholic cardinal, which capture something of the elusive mystery and holiness of the calling to which each of us has been given. Newman writes:

God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission – I

may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good; I shall do His work. I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place while not intending it – if I do but keep His Commandments. Therefore I will trust Him. Whatever, wherever I am, I can never be thrown away. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him; in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him; in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him. He does nothing in vain. He knows what He is about.

My friends, may we each have the courage and wisdom to be faithful to our calling and the tenacity to listen for the voice of God wherever it invites us to go. Amen.