

January 31, 2010 – Fourth Sunday in Epiphany “FTD”

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:21-30

Imagine you are on the pastoral search committee for this church and the one you thought was your ideal candidate has just made her way to San Diego for the long awaited interview. You ask a question about her qualifications and she responds with something like, “Well, I was chosen in the womb for this opportunity. I tried as a youngster to make a career change, but then God said I would be given the words I needed for the job – oh, and by the way, that explains my lack of a seminary degree.”

I imagine you, on the search committee, would be rather polite as you turned toward one another and rolled your eyes. You’d go through the motions – but then, after a few more questions, the interview would end. Pleasant greetings would be exchanged including words like, “Oh, don’t call us – we’ll call you,” and a great sigh of relief would be heard as she walked out the door. Members of the search committee would likely be thinking themselves – this is the last thing we need to hear. And indeed it would be.

They would never hear the likes of Jeremiah talk about building up and planting. The only thing they would hear would be a skeptical voice resonating from within that would overpower the still small voice of Spirit – the one that needs to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and to overthrow before any building and planting can ever begin to take place.

The call of Jeremiah, as was read today, is often relegated either to the myths of the ancient biblical story or thought to be reserved only for prophets or other holy heroes of the sacred texts. It simply doesn’t translate to our world that insists upon credentials, degrees, and ecclesiastical endorsements and practicality.

I realize as I say these words, I run the risk of debunking or trivializing a whole system of theological education that took years to build, and in which we take great pride in mainstream Christendom today. That is not my intent. I’m not that cavalier or stupid. But I do want to suggest that we may have so heavily layered ourselves in formality, expectation and process that we just may run the risk of sucking the life out of what is intended to be a spiritual endeavor. God’s calling upon each one of us – a calling that is a deeply spiritual encounter – the training for which may come much, much later.

Let me try something. If I were to ask you today – when did you sense the call of God in your life? How would you respond? Just think about that for a moment. Have you ever given that any thought? Or do you, as so many do, think that such “callings” are only for ministers, missionaries, chaplains, and the like? What I am suggesting is that God, indeed, calls each one of us. Oh, the calling may not be to ordained ministry – but we receive a call – each one of us – **From** our lives as we know them **To** something (possible or seemingly impossible) to **Do** what God intends for us to do in this life we are blessed to live. **From – To – Do – FTD** – keep that acronym in mind as we think through this for a few moments. At least for **this** sermon it won’t stand for “Florists

Transworld Delivery.” I want you to consider your calling **From** something – **To** Something – as you decide to **Do** the work God intends for you.

As I have already stated, and as we have read time and again in the bible, the calling of God is unpredictable, indiscriminate, and usually quite surprising. You’re going along very nicely in life, minding your own business, making your way in the world as best you can, but there is this gnawing – an inner sense that a message is trying to be communicated to you. Something is bubbling inside. It may not come verbally as an audible voice – in fact that rarely happens. But somehow God speaks and calls you from life as you know it.

Typically, we initially reject such inner pulls – “Oh that’s ludicrous. I couldn’t do that.” Or fear takes over and the thought of radical change simply forces us to dismiss the “voice of God” as our imagination. “That’s not for me, I’ve got responsibilities. I couldn’t afford that. That would be foolish.” In Jeremiah’s case it was, “I don’t know how to speak. I’m only a boy.”

But the call continues – it’s relentless – it will not let us go. God is calling us **FROM** life as we know it.

While I’ve not been a big devotee of the Harry Potter series, I’ve heard the relentless nature of God’s calling explained in terms of the owls that bring Harry invitations to attend Hogwarts School Witchcraft and Wizardry. Harry’s less-than-kind foster parents try, as best they can, to destroy the invitations. They even try to escape to a remote cabin on an island. Finally the umpteenth letter arrives personally delivered by an angry giant named Hagrid.

God’s call was like this for Jeremiah – relentless and inevitable – and may be the same for you.

The call is **from** something **to** something else. You may be called to teach, to serve on a commission in the church, to work at Special Delivery, Uptown, or in the Rolling Readers Program. That’s where the discernment process comes in. I can’t, nor can anyone else, tell you what you are being called to. But what I can say is the call is from life as we think it should be to a fresh start, an unknown, a new way of living that will make a difference in your life and in the lives of others.

The discernment process can be an exciting one if you are open to it. It becomes a time of exploration, of possibility if you allow yourself to be open to Spirit. Discernment is a time of allowing the Stillspeaking God to churn within you so that you might know for sure the direction of God’s call.

But such discernment is not done in a vacuum. It’s one of the beauties of participating in the faith community. It is in **this** setting – this safe place – that we can try out an idea, float a possibility and seek feedback without judgment or aspersion. The faith community can become for us, a resource of guidance and helpful counsel as we

proceed further along in our journey. It is one of the many benefits of participating in the church so we might get a clearer picture of what God is be calling us **to**.

Now some folks get stuck in this leg of the process. It's a lot easier to go on in endless discernment and never make a decision. That's were endless talk and no action give us in the church a bad name. The final step is crucial for any of this to matter.

God's call is **from** something – **to** something – but **you** must ultimately decide for yourself whether or not you will listen and **do** what you believe you are being called to do. That's where faith comes. And that's the hard part.

It's interesting that of the many call stories we read in the bible, the guaranteed reaction is resistance based in fear. Whether it's Moses, or Aaron, Jeremiah, or Isaiah, Mary or even Jesus – human nature has an amazingly consistent default, "Oh I couldn't possibly. . ." Well God doesn't call us to the impossible. In fact, we are reminded time and again to "Fear not!" and "With God all things are possible."

I offer these words on a day when we welcome new members into the life of our church family and I challenge them to be thinking – "To what are you being called as you commit yourself to a life of service in this congregation?" I asked you a vow of participation as part of the joining liturgy. That question was not mere formality. It's all part of the covenant that we make with one another.

I offer these words on a day when we meet together as a congregation in our Annual Meeting and challenge each one of us – "To what are we being called individually and collectively in service to the wider community?" It's not just a pious exercise or formality either. It is instead a holy obligation in response to human need.

We live in a time when the vast majority of individuals – especially those 30 and younger have little patience for the church. They identify as being spiritual but not religious because they see the church as largely irrelevant. But I've not given up. While that may be true for many congregations – it is not the case here. But it will only continue to be so if we continue to be open to the call of God in our lives – individually and collectively.

So I ask you once again, please consider, FTD. How is God speaking in your life? Listen closely, do you hear the call of God? **From** what? **To** what? What will you **do**? Pay attention to that still small voice. Seek the advice of others in your faith community. And respond as, you believe, God is calling you.

Amen.