

Sunday, August 24, 2025
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16C)
Jeremiah 1.4-10
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Formed, Called, and Consecrated”

Sometimes I get the feeling God is messing with me. Not in a mean-spirited way, but in a playful way. That was certainly the feeling I got when I first read the Old Testament passage from the Prophet Jeremiah earlier this week. The opening words of today’s reading have long held special meaning for me in my own spiritual journey:

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
And before you were born I consecrated you”

But it was not just these words that made me feel like God was toying with me. It was reading these words in light of my sermon from last week. As I’m sure you all recall in vivid detail, last Sunday I quoted another passage from Jeremiah as an example of how fire is used as an image for passion—passion for ministry—in the Scriptures:

“Within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot” (Jer 20.9)

It’s not that both passages are from Jeremiah. That is just coincidence. It’s much deeper than that. More personal. It all has to do with something I wrote 25 years ago as I was preparing to enter the discernment process for Holy Orders. One of the first thing you are required to do as part of the process is to write what is called a “spiritual autobiography.” An essay that explores your spiritual journey; how your spiritual life has been shaped over the course of your lifetime; those experiences that have shaped who you are as a spiritual being; and how you have been led to discern a call to Holy Orders. It is a document that follows you through the entire process: first with the discernment committee in your local congregation, and then sent to the Diocesan Commission on Ministry, where it becomes part of your permanent file in the Office of Formation and Transition. The file that is reviewed by multiple people over the course of several years as the Diocese seeks to affirm your sense of call. In many ways, this is a significant and foundational document, serving to start the whole process, but also sticking with you step-by-step up until you are approved for ordination. But even beyond that, it is a formational document for the individual, as they seek to explore in a deeper way who they are as a beloved child of God, how they have grown and developed in their spiritual life, and how they have sought to live into their calling, whatever that may be. Personally, I think the spiritual autobiography is so helpful and so transformational that everyone should consider writing one, regardless of whether called to Holy Orders or not. Because frankly, we are all called into ministry of some sort. And the spiritual autobiography can be a way of more fully exploring who God is calling us to be and what God is calling us to do in our ministries.

With that as background, in 2000 when I prepared my spiritual autobiography, my introductory paragraph included the opening words of today’s Old Testament reading. I wrote:

In his call to the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord says “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you” (Jeremiah 1:5). These words have somehow always spoken to me and had a special meaning for me, although I have not always known why. This essay attempts to trace my own perceived sense of God’s calling through an examination of my spiritual journey, which, much like his call to Jeremiah, and I suspect, to all his people, begins in the womb.

And I ended my spiritual autobiography with the words I quoted last week in my sermon. That concluding paragraph from my spiritual autobiography being:

Since I opened this spiritual autobiography with the words of God to the prophet Jeremiah, it only seems fitting that I close with a later response by Jeremiah to God. I recently came across these words, and they had a special meaning for me in light of my struggles with God’s call. “Within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot” (Jeremiah 20:9).

So, having used Jeremiah’s words in my sermon last week, then having our Old Testament reading this week from Jeremiah—all of which served as the opening and closing of my spiritual autobiography—was a little freaky in some ways. And then, add on top of that that the spiritual autobiography is a foundational document for one’s ministry and that I just returned from Sabbatical, which is a time to intentionally reflect on ministry, vocation, and calling, and my initial reaction was “Okay God, what are you trying to tell me?”

Of course, this is not the place for me to unpack something as personal as my own evaluation of my ministry, vocation, and calling. But it is the perfect place to look at what ministry, vocation, and calling mean for each of us as God’s beloved children and particularly as members of the Body of Christ. And the story of Jeremiah and his own call to ministry has a lot to teach us: about the nature of call, as well as our own tendencies in reacting and responding to God’s invitation to partnership in ministry.

Our Old Testament reading is Jeremiah’s call narrative: the account of God calling Jeremiah to be God’s prophet at a critical period in the history of Judah. The kings of Judah have become increasingly corrupt. Jeremiah is being called to proclaim God’s message to the kings, to the nation of Judah, and to the surrounding nations, warning them that if things do not change, there will be consequences. Spoiler alert, they do no change and in 587 BC Jerusalem falls to the Babylonian Empire, thus beginning the Babylonian Exile. But back to Jeremiah’s call. God calls Jeremiah by saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.” Indicating that even before any of us are even born, God knows us. The eternal souls that will occupy our physical bodies are already in communion with God. That God knows who we are at our deepest spiritual core. That God knows what we will go on to do and accomplish once we are born. That God loves and supports us into and through our physical lives, as we grow and live into who God is calling us to be. That God gives us what we need to live into who we are called to be. That is, if we choose to accept his invitation.

Let's be clear, this applies not just to Jeremiah, not just to those called into Holy Orders. This applies to each and every one of us. God knows each and every one of us before we are born. God consecrates us for service to him and his kingdom before we are born. Our job in this life is to hear the whispers of that calling deep in our souls—whispers that were placed there by God from before we were born—and to determine how we are going to respond. To determine how we are going to live into that calling. To live into our own unique calling in the way that is right for us.

This is the exercise that Jeremiah is engaging in when he responds, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." Jeremiah discerns and recognizes that God is calling him to be a prophet at a difficult time in Judah's history. And he resists. He makes up excuses: "I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But God is having none of it:

"Do not say, 'I am only a boy';
for you shall go to all to 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,

God knows what Jeremiah is capable of. God wouldn't have called him if he were not capable and qualified. And besides that, God assures Jeremiah that he will be with him, supporting him and giving him what he needs to fulfill God's calling.

This whole scene is so common. You hear it all the time among those called to Holy Orders. How they resisted the call to ministry. In the past, I've shared with you the story of my own reluctance, even resistance. In virtually every situation, something invariably changes along the way. The one who is resistant is eventually able to hear God's words of assurance that they are not alone, that God is with them, that God will give them what they need.

Here again, this resistance to hearing God's call, or rather, the resistance to accepting God's invitation and to live into God's call, is not limited to those called to ordained ministry. In all my years as a parish priest and even in my time as a lay person before that, I have seen those who are called to some sort of ministry—be it ordained ministry, but more likely some other ministry in the parish or in the world—and more often than not, they resist. There are always excuses. "I'm not qualified." "I don't have the gifts or skills that it would take." "I don't have time." Generally, these are nothing but excuses. The real issue is fear. Fear of putting ourselves out there. Fear of being vulnerable. Fear of not getting it just right. Fear of disappointing God. That's okay. That's natural. Even Jeremiah, one of the greatest prophets in history, had excuses. Even Jeremiah had fears. And God assured him, "Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you." God speaks these same words to us in the midst of our resisting, in the midst of our fears. "Do not be afraid for I am with you."

After Jeremiah's arguing and back and forth with God, he tells us, "Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth" and issued words of commissioning and of blessing. A sacramental act sending Jeremiah on his way to fulfill his calling, to engage in the ministry that God has prepared him for from the beginning, from even before being formed in the womb.

The commissioning being an outward sign and a reaffirmation of what had already occurred: “before you were born I consecrated you.”

Each of us is consecrated for service to God even before we were born. Each of us is commissioned for service to God by and through baptism. The sacramental act whereby we are invited to share in Christ’s eternal priesthood, becoming his Body in the world. The sacramental act whereby we are called to live into who God has created and calls us to be from before we even drew breath.

As one who spent years struggling with a sense of call, as one who had all sorts of excuses for not accepting, and yes, as one who was afraid to accept, I can say with absolute surety that “giving in” and accepting God’s invitation was literally life-changing, in the best sense. Because it is literally living into the fullness of who you are created and called to be from before time. Bringing a sense of wholeness and deeper connection with the One who formed and consecrated you, who loves and supports you.

Before God formed each of us, he knew us. Before we were born God consecrated us. God appointed us to our own unique ministry in the world. We have already been commissioned by virtue of our baptisms. The question is, are we truly living into who God has created and called us to be? Have we truly accepted God’s invitation to serve him as only we are able to? And are we doing so to the fullest extent possible?

I invite each of us to regularly and deeply ponder these questions.