

OPENING:

Do you ever wonder why when we are deep in thought, or we are trying to remember something important, we put our finger on the crevice of our nose and mouth?

There is a Jewish legend that explains this, that says that just before God puts a soul into the body, God asks the soul to forget its preexistent life.

When the soul enters the body, an angel presses the baby's mouth shut. So, now, when we are remembering who we are, we touch that spot.¹

That's beautiful, and I love that. I don't know if that's true anymore than I know what Jeremiah is claiming in our Old Testament story is true. He says that God told him God had plans for him even before he was born. What do you do with that?

One thing to say is that it's not about reproductive rights, or maternal health, that's not the context that it's been written in. It was not written for a 20th or 21st century argument about personal rights and government, which are our arguments worthy to be had.

But this story of Jeremiah is about who we are called to be in this world and our relationship with God. This story is about God's role in our lives, it's about who we are called to be, it's about starting something new, it's about the uneasiness that goes with that, so it's about backpacks, and it's about blessings.

BACKPACKS

I taught high school for about 10 years, and so I love this time of year, the excitement that goes with the new School Year.

New grade level, new teacher, new bus route, new back-pack,

It *can* be very scary, but kids know that they are headed into something important: to use the fancy church terms, they are living in *Kairos* time, not *Chronos* time.

They know that this Back to School moment is important, it's magical; you are on the precipice of something new and different, full of opportunity and challenge.

I love that image of a child walking into class with this enormous backpack, ready for the school year. The weight of the world on their back, but trudging forward...

¹ Rolheiser, Ronald. 2014. *The Holy Longing: the Search for a Christian Spirituality*. Princeton, NJ: Image, 16.

Jeremiah in our story is probably around that age, probably around 12 or so. He is minding his own business when God “strikes” him on the mouth, the “touch” in our translation is probably a little too soft.

God knocks him about and says “You... You are special, you are who I need.” Jeremiah says “No, I think you have the wrong person, I am too young, too inexperienced”

God says “You are wrong. Because it has nothing to do with your qualifications. And everything to do with me picking you.”

STORY ONE:

Two stories about picking and choosing, about God’s Call to us.

Eugene Peterson recalls his childhood and living in a neighborhood with tons of kids where games were played in the park and streets. Being the youngest and the smallest, he would always get chosen LAST. Sometimes even worse, he would be the odd man out. The captains of the teams would have to argue about who would have to choose him. He was a liability, a minus, not even a zero.

Peterson wrote this later:

“But not with God.

Not a zero.

Not a minus.

(Instead) I have a set-apart place that only I can fill.

No one can substitute for me. No one can replace me.

Before I was good for anything, God decided that I was good for what he was doing.

My place in life doesn’t depend on how well I do in the entrance examination.

My place in life is not determined by what market there is for my type of personality.”²

Jeremiah resists that, we resist that.... that sort of picking and choosing. We don’t mind being chosen by God but we want it because we earned it, we proved it.

God’s arithmetic, calculus, his sorting is on the other hand, oh so confounding because God dispenses with the sort of zero-sum counting.

Again it’s not about the biological timeline of God’s call, it’s about God’s relentless acknowledgement and pursuit of us, to sign us up for his team, for his purposes, using our gifts for God’s side.

² Peterson, Eugene H. 2009. *Run with the Horses: the Quest for Life at its Best.* (2nd Ed.) Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 42.

STORY TWO

Second story: this one from my own teaching career. The school I was teaching at was picking the two sides for 'Field Day.' This was a small, K-12 private school, where the winner of Field Day was a very important thing. And the student captains were going down the list of children with the administrators, making sure that it was fair for who was on which team.

Finally, we got down to the lower grades, and there was a girl, a 1st grader, and she suffered from a medical condition so that she could not really compete in the events, and she would be a liability. So us teachers were thinking of all sort of creative ways that we could 'manage' her handicap, ways to not her embarrass and make sure that it was fair to everyone.

In the midst of our sorting, one of the team captains said "I choose her, she will compete in this event, and she will go first on our team with me."

END OF DISCUSSION

That shut us all up.

Maybe that's what we need.

Remember Jeremiah got struck on the face when he received his Call.

Not the first time, or the last, that someone was Gobsmailed by an encounter with the Divine. If you remember your Scripture....

Isaiah got hit with a burning coal on his mouth

Ezekiel literally had to eat the word of God, to ingest it.

The angel made John the Baptist's father go mute.

The sermon even started with something about us closing our mouths and listening.

Not to mention, when we receive the Bread here, receive the Body of Christ, we eat our beautiful, bounteous delicious loaf from Great Harvest. The bread is too much, (I get some of these [fingers close together] from you.)

That's good unintentional symbolism: in our holy communion, God might be saying: "here is your calling, here is who you are. Be quiet for a moment as you understand the depth and complexity of that relationship."

Eugene Peterson says that our relationship with God is like joining a conversation that has been ongoing for centuries.

We feel the need to interject and speak right away, but instead he suggests maybe some silence, maybe some listening because:

we are joining this conversation that has been ongoing:

SO, “Just shut up for a while, wait until you get caught up... then we will welcome you into the conversation.”³

3rd STORY/ CONCLUSION

Maybe I am thinking not about children, but about adults, as we consider our calls and relationship to God, and new beginnings and thresholds, maybe I am thinking about 2 particular parents who are set to send their 4-year-old into preschool, and are a little nervous about the prospect.

Maybe I can draw inspiration from my final Story, this one is from the natural world, also from Eugene Peterson, who did the heavy lifting for me this week. This one is about tree swallows on a Montana lake. It was a family of these birds, where the mother is trying to teach the chicks how to fly. There are three such baby bird chicks and she dutifully nudges the first one out of the nest, cajoling him into flight. The second one, the same thing happens, slowly but surely, the mother bird can convince the baby bird to let go, to take the leap, to trust and to fly.

But the third one, that third would not be cajoled. Had to be pushed off. The mother bird was not sentimental about it, not overly discerning, like God, she did not consider the baby bird’s qualification. That’s the thing:

“Birds have feet and can walk. Birds have talons and can grasp a branch securely. They can walk; they can cling. But flying is their characteristic action, and not until they fly are they living at their best, gracefully and beautifully.”

That’s our calling, that’s what we have been picked for God’s team to do. During this time and always, with backpack or briefcase or with mouths closed, God has chosen us for “soaring and swooping life of grace.”⁴ That’s the blessing from God for all of us at this moment so that we can learn to be a blessing to others.

AMEN

³ Peterson, 39-40.

⁴ Peterson, 44-45