

"ARE YOU JOKING, GOD? I'M ONLY A TEENAGER"

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Text: Jeremiah 1: 1-10, Luke 4: 21-30

Are any of you fans of the comic strip Peanuts that features Charlie Brown? In one cartoon segment Snoopy the dog is standing over his supper dish and asks himself: "Supper time... Is this all there is to my life? Is this the sum total of my existence? Do I really live just to eat? Is this all I'm really good for?" He pauses for a minute and goes on: "I must think about that sometime and he commences to eat." I'd like to suggest that what we have in our Old Testament reading is an inner conversation between an individual and His Maker raising the same question as Snoopy did and that is life's most important question: what is the meaning and purpose of my existence?

Doesn't Jeremiah 1 in asking such a fundamental question come very close to home? What should I do with my life?...teenagers thinking about college and the rest of their lives...new mothers struggling with being home or going back to work...people facing job uncertainty...young marrieds deciding when to have children...people approaching retirement wondering when to take the step and what to do afterwards. Have I left anybody out? The first chapter of Jeremiah touches upon the desire of all of us to find meaning in life.

God called Jeremiah. What does that mean? Does this happen with a thunder bolt as some evangelists would lead you to believe? What we are talking about is very personal and thus all I can do is to speak from personal experience. That thunder bolt never hit me but when I was 17 or 18 and thinking about my future it seemed to me that doing something worthwhile ought to be part of the picture. Part of my search can be attributed to 2 laymen in a New Jersey church who gave of their time for a bunch of teenagers who didn't seem very interested. For the next 4 years while in college possibilities wandered all over the place: leading a boy scout troop after work, teaching, becoming a social worker, leading a youth group. In my senior year I decided that being a pastor might be the way to give something back to God so I applied to seminary. After seminary graduation, believe me, it was several years before I felt that being in the pastorate was what God wanted me to be about and even now I sometimes still wonder. So I would suggest that this dialogue between you and God is most apt to be a lifelong process which comes to the forefront in transitional moments such as graduation, getting married, becoming a parent, changing jobs, losing a loved one.

Jeremiah was a teenager when he started to wrestle with what God wanted him to do with his life. The more he felt God pushing him the more he resisted. "I'm too young. I'm a terrible speaker. No one is going to listen to me." You will recall that earlier in the Hebrew Scriptures another person called by God offered similar excuses. Moses had all kinds of rationalizations when he first felt God moving his life in new directions and kept saying he wasn't the right person for the job. Surely you may have the same reaction when you begin to get that inner tug and pull that God is challenging you to take your faith more seriously.

Why this reluctance? Again the TV evangelists would have you think that when God enters the picture life suddenly becomes all bright and glittery. Consider, however, what it is that our Creator is asking us to be about. It's nothing less than being very intentional about making each day a partnership with our Maker. Jesus spoke of "going the 2nd mile." It means taking very seriously what God might want as we shape each week: in the home, at work, in our relationships. Partnership brings new challenges to what is called "daily living." For Jeremiah, it meant criticizing the unfaithfulness of the nation and taking on the king. How about that kind of calling in our day?

Is it anyone wonder that there is inner resistance in all of us? Karl Barth, the great Swiss theologian, spoke of "swimming against the stream." Who wants to do that day after day? We have the example of Jesus who after feeling God's call returned to his hometown and tested out his new message. The result? - they chased him out of the village!

The struggle to be faithful to God and what that means goes on throughout one's life. Jeremiah never became totally comfortable with his role "swimming against the stream." His life as a prophet spanned 40 years and on more than one occasion you can sense his discomfort with the role that God had placed upon him.

Each of us has to wrestle continually with what it means to live out one's faith. Faithfulness, as we know, is easy to talk about and difficult to put into practice. Have you ever felt yourself saying "Yes, Lord, I want to be a Christian but God couldn't you make it a little easier or approach me at a more convenient time?" Many years ago there was religious musical "For Heaven's Sake!" and the words of several of the songs have stuck with me. One song reflects our reluctance to move forward in faith.

"Use me but NOT just now.
As soon as I'm out of college,
And pay all the debts I've carried;
As soon as I get settled in business
As soon as I've gotten married;

I want you to use me, O Lord, use me, O Lord, but NOT just now

As soon as I've paid the mortgage,
As soon as the kids are grown;
As soon as they've finished college
As soon as I've reached retirement

And the list of reasons to wait goes on and on, doesn't it? There never is a perfect time to respond, is there? It doesn't matter what arena of life that we are describing, being a responsible worker, being an understanding parent, fighting for justice, following Christ is life's biggest challenge.

You may be asking yourself after all that I have said: "If it is such a struggle, why, then, does anyone respond to the call of the Lord?" It's because when this call gets into the marrow of your being the exhilaration is awesome. It really gives new bounce to each day. "Vision" is the buzz word in industry right now. "You have to have a vision if you are going to succeed" is heard over and over. The call to partnership with the Almighty presents a life view that is filled with new and challenging opportunities. Regardless of our outward circumstances, this week seen in light of the command to seek love, peace and justice becomes filled with possibilities.

As an individual "catches" the divine call, God fills that person with increasing strength. "Do not be afraid, Jeremiah," God said. "I will be with you." The more one responds to the call the more one feels deeply the presence of her Creator. Life suddenly ceases to be a frazzled, purposeless mess and there is harmony and challenge and empowerment surging to the surface. The spiritual song this morning declares "Guide my feet while I run this race, hold my hand while I run this race, stand by me while I run this race, I'm your child while I run this race." Can you see why life would have more meaning and value sharing in the divine dream and walking in the presence of the Almighty?

If God can call Jeremiah who was "just a teenage," then, surely God can call each one of us. What does God want me to do with my life? That's not just Snoopy's question. It's all of ours. What does God expect of me needs to be added to the equation of life as we make future plans. Be open, wrestle, step forward. Life is a race. We all know that. We often call it "a rat race" but there is something more. Discover the joy, purpose and satisfaction that comes when God is with us as we run and "guides our feet and holds our hand and stands by us."