

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church

By Chris Fillingham

"Partners"

Jeremiah 1:4-10

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There's a wonderful little book I came across several years ago. It's a children's book titled *Does God Have a Big Toe? Stories about Stories in the Bible*. It's Midrash. Midrash is the way Rabbis teach the meaning of scripture. They tell stories about the stories in the Bible.

This morning I want to read to you from the first story titled, "Partners"

Before there was anything, there was God, a few angels, and a huge swirling glob of rocks and water with no place to go. The angels asked God, "Why don't you clean up this mess?"

So God collected rocks from the huge swirling glob and put them together in clumps and said, "Some of these clumps of rocks will be planets, and some will be stars, and some of these rocks will be... just rocks."

Then God collected water from the huge swirling glob and put it together in pools of water and said, "Some of these pools of water will be oceans, and some will become clouds, and some of this water will be... just water."

Then the angels said, "Well God, it's neater now, but is it finished?" And God answered... "NOPE!"

On some of the rocks God placed growing things, and creeping things, and things that only God knows what they are, and when God had done all this, the angels asked God, "Is the world finished now?" And God answered:

"NOPE!"

God made a man and a woman from some of the water and dust and said to them, "I am tired now. Please finish up the world for me... really it's almost done." But the man and woman said, "We can't finish the world alone! You have the plans and we are too little."

"You are big enough," God answered them. "But I agree to this. If you keep trying to finish the world, I will be your partner."

Partner. It's great to imagine, isn't it? Especially when we think about God calling us to something... or someone.

The Bible is full of stories of God calling people... God calls people to tasks, or places, or roles. We just heard the story of Jeremiah's calling, and it's kind of fun to imagine what this scene might have been like.

A young Jeremiah is sitting there in his tent. Maybe there's a dust storm blowing outside. While he's waiting it out, Jeremiah is working on his homework... I'm sure. Or at least he's trying to, but the wind keeps swirling through the seams of the tent and blowing out his candle... wouldn't you know it?

He keeps thinking he's already out-used this excuse with his teacher... "My candle wouldn't stay lit." It's the ancient version of "the dog ate my homework."

So he lights the candle again... and just as he gets back into a groove, the candle blows out again... And after the third time (it always happens in threes, you know)... so after the third time the candle blows out, Jeremiah hears, "the voice."

You know what voice I'm talking about?

The Voice.

There's only one voice it could be:

It's James Earl Jones' voice echoing through his tent – "Jeremiah."

That's how we picture it, isn't it? When we read that God spoke to someone in the Bible, we imagine it's this deep resonating voice that rumbles in your chest.

And I don't know, maybe it was... but I've never known God to speak like that... and I don't know anyone who has.

And so, I wonder if we've got that all wrong. Maybe when the Lord spoke to Moses or when the Lord spoke to Jeremiah it was more like a windy whisper... "*Jeremiah...*"

Or maybe it's even quieter than that.

Do you remember the story of Elijah up on Mt Horeb? He went up on the mountain to encounter God and there was this great wind, like a tornado, that tore the mountain apart and shattered the rocks...

But God was not in the powerful wind.

Then the mountain began to shake. There was an earthquake. But God was not in the earthquake.

Elijah is still standing there, waiting for God to speak to him... After the wind and after the earthquake there was this great fire... But God was not in the fire

After the fire came *the sound of sheer silence*. It was in the silence that Elijah heard God's voice...

Maybe when God came to **Jeremiah** for the first time it was more like the voice of James Earl Jones... I don't know. But something tells me it wasn't. I mean, a booming voice works well in the movies, but it's not very true to life, is it?

Sometimes we read the Bible and want to make it into a fairy tale. We read these stories and picture them on the big screen... But they really are the stories of people's lives... people just like you and me... trying to figure out what in the world that whisper stirring in their soul was just saying.

So when we read, "The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah..." I imagine it came just like the word of the Lord comes to you...

And what is that like?

From your experience... how has the word of the Lord come to you?

I imagine it's been a little more mysterious than a booming voice. I mean if your experience has been anything like mine, it can be downright hard to recognize sometimes. How do you hear God's voice?

There are a lot of ways God might be speaking to you.
And there are a lot of ways we might confuse our own thinking and feeling for God's voice to us.

Which is one of the reasons the church is so important, you know.
The truth of the matter is, we hear better together than we hear by ourselves.

In fact, Barbra Brown Taylor has said, we're not meant to hear the call all by ourselves.

Our eyes need other eyes.
Our ears need other ears.

We need other hearts and other minds and other voices to help us discern the silent voice of God amidst the noisy chatter of our lives.

And when we do hear, to help us interpret and understand what it is we've heard.

The Quakers have a long tradition of doing this well. They have something called a "**clearness committee**." You and I might call it a discernment committee. It's a really beautiful practice.

Imagine for a moment you're trying to make some big decision and there's a lot to consider. You could do what most folks do; make a list of pros and cons and eventually just decide.

Or maybe you talk to your spouse, or a trusted friend... and at some point you jump in the deep waters... hoping for the best.

But sometimes when you're at a fork in the road, you need more clarity. You need the cloudy, jumbled questions and concerns to part enough to have some clearness about what God would have you do... because ***your heart...*** is to live this life of yours... guided by God's desire for your life.

So you gather a group of people you trust... people who have learned to listen deeply... to be attentive to God's stirring in you.

And maybe you gather in our prayer chapel... and you pray together... and you share your story and your question with them... and they ***simply listen...***

They aren't there to give you advice...
or tell you what to do...
but they listen deeply.

And after a period of silence, they share with you what they noticed or heard you say... they share with you any images that came to mind.

Again, they don't tell you what to do... but they might ask you questions...
questions you hadn't thought of before...
and in the process... ***the cloudiness does begin to clear for you.***

That's how a clearness committee works. And it's the process I used when I was trying to decide whether or not to start a doctorate program.

I was weighing a lot of factors... lots of pros and cons. Because I knew it would require a lot of me, and consume my time and energy in a very particular kind of way.

I knew it would cost me something, and cost my family something, and cost Dayspring something.

But I also knew it could help me become a better pastor...
and a better human being,
and a better person.

There were so many questions I was wrestling with.

So, a year and a half ago, a group of folks from Dayspring met with me a number of times.

And their listening, and reflecting, and questioning, gradually gave me the clarity. As the Quaker tradition puts it, "Way opened before me."

That is... gradually... clarity came. And I took the leap... and this week starts my second year of swimming in those deep waters... that I can see now is such a profound gift. I'm so grateful for Dayspring's support... and for my family's support... and for this journey I'm on.

All of it... because I allowed your eyes and ears to help me see and hear what God was inviting me to.

Sometimes the best way to hear God speak to us... is through our beloved community. We're not meant to hear... all by ourselves.

Our eyes need other eyes.

Our ears need other ears.

We need other hearts, and other minds, and other voices, to help us discern the silent voice of God amidst the noisy chatter of our lives.

It's just not that easy to hear the call of God all by yourself.

Sometimes we try.

And truth be told... a lot of the time... a lot of the time ***we don't even try.***

We go it alone.

We just sort of muddle our way through, don't we?

We try to figure things out... as best we can.

And maybe months go by... maybe years... but we keep making choices about our life without spending much time listening to the One who gave us this life to begin with.

Sometimes that works out well.

Sometimes it doesn't.

But eventually, some day comes along and we wonder: "*Why has God never spoken to me?*" When the truth of the matter is... ***we were never listening.***

The voice of the Lord came to Jeremiah. And I have a hunch that the voice of the Lord comes to you, too. God is whispering, or shouting, or nudging... or signing to you. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you. Before you were born I set you apart."

It's not just a word to Jeremiah.

And it's not just a word to pastors or those who are called to be clergy.

God is calling you.

God formed you in the womb

and God calls you to be one of God's "partners" in this world.

That's part of why you are here. It's what your life is about... to partner with God in the ongoing work of creation.

That's what your life is invited to be... in every aspect of your week... in every place you go... in all the work that has been given to you.

You are called to be about the work of creating God's goodness in the world... in everything you do... in every part of your week.

I know that's easy to lose sight of... especially when you're chasing another deadline, or grinding away at another assignment, or dealing with a difficult boss.

It's easy to lose sight ***that your hands are the hands of Christ in the world***... when you're doing dishes or changing dirty diapers.

It's easy to forget that your life is holy, and your work is holy, when the company you work for is squeezing every penny out of you they can.

In fact, sometimes we've gotten this whole idea of "God's calling" all messed up... thinking that only pastors and ministers are called by God. Everybody else just has to make a living. Sure, a calling to ministry is a particular kind of calling in the church.

But it's not the only calling.

And honestly, it might not be the most important calling.

Because God calls most people right into the messiness of our everyday world.

For most of the church, your calling is smack-dab in the midst of the workday world.

And ***that*** work is holy and sacred. So it matters how you do that work...

Dorothy Sayers reminds us that, "the very first demand that [Jesus-the-carpenter's] religion makes upon [us] is that [we] should make good tables." In other words, your work is sacred. How you do your work matters.

Way back in your baptism, your hands were claimed by God.

Back in your baptism you said "yes" to be one of God's partners in this world.

And sure, sometimes a job is just a job. Sometimes what you do to make a paycheck isn't your deepest calling in this world. That's ok. But how you do it still matters. How you teach your students...

How you manage the accounts...

How you approach your work...

How you show up each day... matters.

Because you too have been set apart...

not to serve the bottom line of a business,

or to serve your boss's ego...

or even to serve your own bank account.

You have been set apart to do God's work in the world,

to produce good in the world.
How you do your job... and live your week...is all part of that.

Because ***in a religion where we follow a carpenter, the first demand put on us has to be to make good tables... beautiful tables...***

and know that in our making...

God is making something beautiful, and sacred, and holy.

You see, to live out God's calling on your life... doesn't necessarily mean doing something you're not already doing. It doesn't mean you have to ***do more***, or be more, or accomplish something great. It simply means that you begin to see yourself as ***God's person***,

in the world... ***for*** the world.

It means... you learn to listen to the sacred calling of God's voice... in your everyday life.

God made a man and a woman from some of the water and dust and said to them, "I am tired now. Please finish up the world for me... really it's almost done."

But the man and woman said, "We can't finish the world alone! You have the plans and we are too little."

"You are big enough," God answered them. "But I agree to this. If you keep trying to finish the world, I will be your partner."

The man and the woman asked, "What's a partner?" and God answered, "A partner is someone you work with on a big thing that neither of you can do alone. If you have a partner, it means that you can never give up because your partner is depending on you. On the days you think I am not doing enough, and on the days I think you are not doing enough, even on those days we are still partners and we must not stop trying to finish the world. That's the deal." And they all agreed to that deal.

Then the angels asked God, "Is the world finished yet?" and God answered, "I don't know. Go ask my partners."

Amen.