

Breaking Free

Jer 1:4-10; Luke 13:10-17

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Church of the New Covenant

Rick Neale

Jeremiah was sitting out there, wherever a city dweller would sit in those days, 2600 years ago. He could have been on a rooftop in a corner of the city, where he would see the hot colors painted by the late sun on the city's towers. He could have been outside the eastern gate, as the sun set behind the great walls and the darkness began to fill the valley below and the air began to cool and change its smell. Suddenly he heard something. Well, he didn't actually *hear* it, but there was a voice.

It said, "I've got a job for you. I've made you a prophet."

Jeremiah was *not* glad to hear this. So he said, "Oh no. You must be mistaken. I wouldn't know what to say or what to do. And besides, I'm only a kid."

Jeremiah was fairly sure that whatever the task was, it would be difficult. It might also be dangerous. So he said, "No thanks, God. You're talking to the wrong person. Go find somebody else."

Who can blame him?

Jeremiah is not the only biblical figure who said No when God tapped him on the shoulder.

Take Moses, for example. One day, while Moses was out in the desert, minding his own business – and his father-in-law's sheep – God got his attention by setting fire to a bush. God said, "Moses, the people of Israel are suffering terribly under the heel of the Pharaoh. I have been listening to their cries, and they need help. So, I'm going to send you to talk to the Pharaoh."

Moses said, "Wait a second. I'm a nobody. I can't just march up the Pharaoh and tell him, 'Thanks for your hospitality. Time for us to leave.'"

"Oh, but I'll be with you."

“Yeah, but, what if the Israelites say ‘Who sent you?’”

“Tell them *I Am Who I Am* sent you.”

“Ohh ... kayyyyy ... Um, what if they don’t believe me?”

“Don’t *worry*. I’ll show you signs to perform.”

“But wait. I don’t talk so good! Really. I can’t do this.”

“Moses. Just go!! I’ll tell you what to say.”

“Come on, God. Send somebody else. Okay?”

Moses was one of the greatest leaders of all time. But when God asked him to step up to that task, he was very resistant. The same is true of Gideon, the mighty warrior, who said “How can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest one.” And Isaiah, who, when he saw the vision of God in the temple, said, “Oh no! I am a dead man!” And Elisha, who tried frantically to keep his master Elijah from going away because he didn’t feel ready for the job.

Jeremiah’s reluctance to accept a call is very understandable.

The theme is common in literature. Aragorn, in *Lord of the Rings*, spends most of his life wandering the far reaches of Middle Earth under a mysterious name because he is not at all eager to claim the throne that is rightfully his and take on the evil that has been devastating his people. Harry Potter, the young magician, has no desires at all to be a hero. All he wants to do is fit in.

The theme of the reluctant hero occurs in our great stories because it is a part of real life. Rosa Parks was no seeker of recognition, and certainly not of fame.

After a day at work at the Montgomery Fair department store, Rosa Parks boarded the Cleveland Avenue bus at around 6 p.m. December 1, 1955. She paid her fare and sat in an empty seat in the first row of seats reserved for blacks in the "colored" section, in the back half of the bus.

Soon both the black and the white sections were filled with passengers. Seeing a white man standing in the front of the bus, the driver called back, demanding that four of the black passengers stand up and move to the rear. Nothing happened.

The driver said, "Y'all better make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats." Three of them complied. Rosa Parks stayed put.

The driver came and stood over her and said, "Why don't you stand up?" She replied, "I don't think I should have to stand up." Then driver, claiming police powers under the segregation laws, notified her she was under arrest, ordered her to remain in her seat, and brought her to the police station.

Years later, in recalling the events of the day, Parks said, "When that white driver stepped back toward us, when he waved his hand and ordered us up and out of our seats, I felt a determination cover my body like a quilt on a winter night."

(Compiled from accounts in "Parting the Waters", by Taylor Branch; Wikipedia entry "Rosa Parks"; and her autobiography, "My Story" [with James Haskins].)

There are times when people discover that the circumstances they are in call for action. They begin to realize the situation is larger than themselves, and recognize in that moment that an opportunity has presented itself to *them*. They have a decision to make: Step forward with courage to wrest the sword from the stone, or step aside – and wait to see if, maybe, someone else might come along.

When faced with new and challenging opportunities for ministry, resistance is a normal thing to feel.

That's why Jeremiah said, "Sorry, God. Not me. I wouldn't know what to say or what to do. And besides, I'm only a kid."

So, God shrugged those mighty shoulders and went off in search of a more willing or, perhaps, naïve volunteer.

Not so.

Even before telling Jeremiah what was going to be asked of him, God said something very profound, something which all of us should pay close attention to. God said, “Before I formed you in the womb, *I knew you.*” Whether or not we can unpack the mystery of God’s ability to know people or events outside the limitations of time, the Hebrew vocabulary of this passage is telling us something very important about God. God’s knowledge of a person is deeper and more complete than the person’s own self-knowledge. It is what Paul refers to, centuries later, in his letter to the Romans: “When we do not know how to pray as we ought, the very Spirit of God prays for us, with groans too deep for words.” The Spirit of God searches deep within the human heart.

God’s statement, *I knew you* or, more to the point, *I know you*, conveys a profoundly intimate understanding of who Jeremiah is, what Jeremiah fears, what Jeremiah’s limitations are, *and* what Jeremiah’s true capabilities are.

So even as Jeremiah objected, God was responding. The first thing God said was, “Quit making excuses!” “Don’t tell me you’re just a boy. Don’t you think I know that? So don’t worry about what you will have to do or what you will have to say. I will give you all of that.”

“And don’t be afraid of anybody I send you to, either, because I am not sending you out there all alone. I will be in your words, I will be in your actions, I will be in your mind and in your heart. I will be with you.”

Then, in a gesture both tender and potent, God touched the boy’s lips, granting him the power of prophecy and the authority to challenge the mightiest rulers on earth.

I hope all of us are listening closely.

We who are part of Church of the New Covenant right now face an important juncture as we begin our new program year. This is in fact a critical juncture. Our resources are low. Our membership has been shrinking. Our energies are spread thin. Our past is, well, *past*, and our future is uncertain; *very* uncertain.

Is there a future for us?

Is it impossible for us to imagine that God might call us in a new direction, that God might call us to do something entirely new?

God has a question for us: “Who are you *not* to imagine that I have a new ministry for you?”

Who are you *not* to imagine that I have a future for you?

Keep your doors open and your lights on! Reach out in fresh ways in new circumstances! Run forth among your neighbors, and tell them how much I love them!

I am God, and with me *nothing is impossible!*

My people! My people of Church of the New Covenant! I know you! You come into my courts bent over like the woman in the synagogue, hobbled, shuffling when you should be dancing, sighing when you should be singing, gripped by the paralysis of old habits.

O my people, listen to me! I am the one who saw the affliction of the woman in the synagogue. I am the one who laid my hand upon her and straightened her up. I am the one who enabled her to break free and live.

Call to me and I will answer! Search diligently for me and you will find me! Open your doors and your hearts to me and I will come running in! Hand me all your fears, your failings, your frailties, and I will heal you and you will break free!

For I am preparing to call you to a new work and a new life.

O my people! I am with you. Listen and pray! Listen and pray! Listen. And pray.