

“What Does God See in You?”

Jeremiah 1.4–10 and Luke 4.16–30

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 1 Feb 2004

When I say “prophet,” what is the visual image that comes into your mind? Is the person male or female? Old or young? Black, white, brown? For me, I see an wizened, elderly man with a long beard, very Semitic in features, wearing a Jewish prayer shawl. But that’s a pretty limited vision of what prophets were – or are – like. I could be thinking instead of Miriam, the sister of Moses. I could have imagined Martin Luther King, Jr.

The text from Jeremiah describes the call of one of the most famous of the Hebrew prophets, and Jeremiah is only a boy when this happens. Jeremiah, like Moses attempts one of those “don’t call on me, God” lines, and says, “I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” And like Moses, he is assured by God that the Almighty hasn’t made a mistake in selecting a prophet. It’s as if Jeremiah himself has the same impression that prophets should only be the elders in our midst. But, divine wisdom comes from people of all ages.

When I was in divinity school taking a class on faith development, we were asked interview children about their experience or thoughts about God. And so I interviewed Cameron, who then was two and a half. Here is a transcript of our conversation:

Hal: Cameron, Where is God?

Cam: God lives in my house.

Hal: Have you ever seen God?

Cam: Yeah. God is a boy and a girl. He’s a nice guy. God is a boy and a girl.

Hal: Does God talk to you?

Cam: Yes!

Hal: What does God say?

Cam: “Hi, Cameron!”

Hal: And what do you say to God?

Cam: “Thank you, God.”

Hal: Why do you say, “Thank you?”

Cam: (mildly annoyed at such a stupid question) For talking to me!

I don’t think that’s such an unusual experience for a young child to have; it’s just unusual that an adult would take the time to ask them such a question. (I certainly would not have done so, if I hadn’t had a seminary assignment.)



So, does God talk to us and through us? Does God call us to do things? Clearly, I think so. As I’ve said before, one criterion I apply when someone claims to have a revelation or an epiphany or a call is whether it fits in with the life and teachings of Jesus. I think that’s the best yardstick we have by which to measure God’s intention for humanity.

Have you been called by God? I’ll bet that most of us at Plymouth don’t think we’ve had that experience. (But perhaps that’s because no grownup has ever taken the time to ask you.) So, I’m asking you: *have you been called by God?* And if so, to do what?

I wrestled like crazy with that question during the ordination process, because it’s one of the questions asked at an ecclesiastical council, which is a public forum that, among other things, examines candidates for ordained ministry. I concluded that I did feel a sense of vocation.

But, calling doesn't just happen for ordained ministers, and it doesn't just happen around career choices. You may sense a deep call to be a parent, or to teach, or to reach out to a friend, or to spend time in the backcountry.

One of the best ways calling has been described is by Jean Dalby Clift, a Jungian analyst and Episcopal priest, with whom I was privileged to study. She writes that "vocation is for every person and involves lives lived in fullness, whether short or long, whether famous or unsung, remembered or forgotten. The miracle of human life which I have observed convinces me that we each matter to the world, whether the world ever knows it or not. We can make a difference, and living our most true lives begins when we begin to see what God sees in us."¹

So, what does God see in you? When all of the externals are stripped away – the makeup and the Gucci loafers, the blue blazer or the fleece vest, even the Birkenstocks and the black robe – what does God see in you?

"Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you." Those are powerful words that God speaks to Jeremiah. We all have a desire to be known and loved, and God does both for each and every one of us. So, what does God see in you? Is it the ability to knit or to design web pages or to cook or to listen or to build? Even deeper than your abilities, what does God see in you? Is yours a soul that is nourished by companionship or by solitude? Are you intuitive or do you rely more on keen senses for evidence of the world around you? Are you primarily analytical or do you use your emotions to make decisions? What does God see in you?

Anthony de Mello, a wise Jesuit, wrote these brief words: "Behold God beholding you...and smiling."



So, who were you expecting to be called by God? Somebody older and wiser than you? No, **you** are called. **You** have a vocation. It just takes work to unwrap it, like removing the layers of an onion. For some of us, it happens when we're young and for others when we're quite elderly. And for some of us, it keeps unfolding over time, as if we are called to do different things at different times.

One of the truths that seems to be present in all the world's major religions is the idea that the extraordinary can rise up in the midst of the everyday. Frederick Buechner has something wonderful to say about this, too, which fits into the idea of vocation: "Listen to your life, see it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis, all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace."² So, listen to your life and consider what God sees in you.



There are times, of course, when others do not see in us what God does. The good, upstanding citizens of Nazareth just couldn't see in Jesus what God saw in him. He reads from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...release to the captives...recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," he says.

What nerve! How does this guy – isn't he Mary and Joe's kid – get off saying such things?! Let's get him outta here and throw him out of town.

¹ Jean Dalby Clift, *Core Images of the Self*, pp. 88-9.

² Frederick Buechner, *Now and Then*.

But Jesus gets it, and he says that “no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.” That’s still the wisdom of our day. Have you ever had that experience? During my three years of seminary, I was both a member at First Congregational UCC in Boulder and I also served as minister with the East Boulder UCC Fellowship, a new-church start exploration. And even though I was a licensed minister, I was still Hal, the fellow member of First Congregational and nice, young divinity student. But the funniest thing happened when I was ordained and moved to Connecticut: suddenly I was *the Reverend Hal Chorpenning, associate conference minister*. I was no longer the hometown boy, I was “*the man*.”

We have an inclination, just as the folks in Nazareth did, to call in the experts, rather than trust in our own God-given wisdom and the wisdom of those in our midst, and listen to God’s leading. You may recall that for our Strategic Plan, we used a consultant named Alice Mann. But, we used her because of her experience and proven track record, not because she was *the Reverend Alice Mann, senior consultant with the Alban Institute*.

So, when do you “call in the experts,” rather than trusting yourself? And, on the other hand, when are you able to see in yourself what God sees in you?

I want to leave you with a story you already know. But, perhaps you’ll think of it differently in this context. Do you remember that wonderful scene in *The Wizard of Oz*, when the wizard behind the curtain fulfils the wishes of the tin woodman, the cowardly lion, and the scarecrow? It’s such a wonderful, deeply metaphoric story: to the tin woodman who wanted a heart, the wizard gave a mechanical clock in the shape of a heart. And to the cowardly lion who wanted courage, the wizard presented medals for bravery. And to the scarecrow who wanted a brain, he awarded an honorary diploma.

Yet, also in that story the great and powerful Oz is revealed not to be an immense, disembodied head surrounded by flames, but a human just like the rest of us. “I’m an old Kansas man myself,” he confesses to Dorothy. In this instance, being from Kansas is kind of like being from Nazareth.

But, do you remember that what the wizard *really* provided was a way for each one of them to see what was truly inside them all along? He enabled each of them to see in themselves what God sees in them. “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you.”

What is it that *you* need? Is it a heart, a medal, a diploma or recognizing that you’ve been home all along? We all need something; I’d suggest that we need to see ourselves – and each other – as God sees us. We will have ample courage, feeling, intellect, and a sense of being home – because we are *known* and *called* by God.

Amen.