

## ***“When Our Little Lives Turn on a Dime”***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on January 30, 2022*

*based on Jeremiah 1:4–10*

How do you know what you are supposed to do with the rest of your life? This is a weighty question, regardless of where you happen to be on your journey: facing a decision about graduate school and career; working hard at your job while wondering whether it’s the right one; deciding what to do when the kids are fledged, approaching retirement when the work that has occupied you and defined you is coming to an end and you’re wondering what you will do with the your final chapters. Big stuff.

The one question that we ministers are most frequently asked at parties is, “How did you decide to be a minister?” and what that question really amounts to is, “You seem to have a brain, how did you decide to do *this* with your one precious life?” It always reminds me of that day long ago when, having put the decision off as long as possible, I had to declare myself. One of the questions the presbytery asks is, “Do you, in your heart, know yourself called by God to ministry?”

Well, there were several of us that day at the Presbytery meeting at First Presbyterian Church in downtown Portland, Oregon. The others, I remember, spoke in perfectly conventional terms about Jesus Christ and how God wanted them to be Presbyterian ministers and attend Presbyterian seminaries.

When my turn came I said something about God being a mystery, a vague kind of “biggerness,” and I mentioned having blundered into a student pastorate in remote rural Oregon where I was hired because I was the only applicant, and no *ordained* minister wanted to serve a congregation at the end of the known world. The Presbytery gave me a little push-back for being un-typical, but, in the end, in the only divided vote of the afternoon, they approved me, such as I was, with my, at best, sketchy theology, along with the rest.

So, there is something in me that identifies with the little story in the first chapter of the book of the Prophet Jeremiah. The year is 627 B.C.E., the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah, the king. Jeremiah is a boy, the son of a priest, and in this instance, God is anything but vague, speaking directly and precisely:

“Before I formed you . . . I knew you, . . . I consecrated you; I appointed you to be a prophet to the nations.”

And then comes young Jeremiah’s wonderfully human response: “Thank you very much, but no thanks. I mean, I don’t know the first thing about public speaking; crowds scare me. Besides, I’m just a boy. Choose someone else.”

Well, this isn’t rare. I mean, in several Hebrew Testament stories God summons, and the one summoned resists. When God came to Moses and told him his job was to go to Egypt, confront Pharaoh, and lead the people to freedom, Moses said, in effect, “Who me? I’m just a shepherd; I’m working class. I’m not eloquent. I stutter. Besides I’m happy right here, tending these goats, and my girlfriend would like us to stay here, close to family. Please find someone else.”

Yes, but God persists—won’t take no for an answer—and then makes a promise: “You’re not in this alone. I’ll be with you every step of the way.”

“Don’t say you’re only a boy,” God tells young Jeremiah, “You shall go to those to whom I send you and say what I want you to say. Don’t be afraid; I will be with you.”

For Jeremiah, the call was to become God’s spokesperson, a prophet. For Yo-Yo Ma the call was to play the cello. For Damian Lillard, it’s swishing a basketball from half-court. For Georgia O’Keefe it was painting the reds, yellows, and muted greens of northern New Mexico, a region no one east of there knew anything about in the 1930s.

For some it’s clear: it’s simply doing what one is obviously equipped and gifted to do. Yes, but for most of us, we have to wrestle more with that question. We were not arrested by our gift when we were children.

One of the classics in the literature on this topic is Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet*, a young man who apparently is struggling with whether to be a writer:

“No one can advise you,” Rilke wrote. “Go into yourself. . . . Confess whether you would have to die if you were forbidden to write. . . .

If one feels one *could*, in fact, live without writing, then one shouldn't write at all" ("Letter One," *Letters to a Young Poet*).

That's one way: ask yourself if you can imagine *not*—playing the cello, arguing the case, teaching the class, nurturing the child, delivering meals on wheels.

Another way, of course, is to identify what, in fact, makes you feel happy and fulfilled.

Social science is paying a lot of attention to that topic these days. Dan Gilbert, who teaches at Harvard, is known as *Professor Happiness*.

He does research on what happiness is, and how to get some. One of his major findings is that the best predictor of happiness is human relationships and how much time a person spends with family and friends. Professor Gilbert observes the irony that a lot of people "sacrifice social relationships to get other things that won't make them as happy."

Now, who hasn't been guilty of that—of missing a child's recital or track meet, a concert with a friend, a dinner party, in order to finish a project at work. But Professor Gilbert says, "You couldn't pay me \$100,000 to miss a play-date with my granddaughters."

More intriguing is an essay about this called, "No Return," by Scott Neeson. Neeson was president of Twentieth Century Fox and living a charmed life in Hollywood. Known for taking interesting vacations, he found himself backpacking in Cambodia, where he saw street children begging for handouts and trolling the dumps for food and for anything to sell. It got to him, deeply. As a result, he organized the *Cambodia Children's Fund*. He started to raise money, and began "shuttle philanthropy," traveling back and forth between Phnom Penh and Hollywood. He describes a watershed moment in his life connected to this:

*The phone rang. An actor who was on tour was having a serious meltdown because his private jet didn't have the right amenities, and he didn't want to get on it . . . . He told me that life wasn't meant to be so difficult. . . .*

*And I thought, What the hell? Here is a man having a tantrum about a private jet, and I'm sitting with these dying children. I wanted to scream into the phone, "Come down here for a day and see what it's all about."*

Nesson reflects, "I sort of enjoyed [my film producer life], but I wasn't happy." So he quit running Fox, "climbed down the corporate ladder." Now he works full-time for the Cambodian Children's Fund and says, "I've never been happier in my life. . . . I get up in the morning and I can't wait to get to work. How many people can say that?"

Not everyone can do that, obviously. Some particularly blessed souls, and I count myself among them, get paid to do what they love doing. And some must earn their living in order to do what most makes them happy. And some work all their lives and are never sure that what they are doing amounts to anything or makes any difference at all. That's the case for a lot of really good people.

Maybe you're one of them. Most of us have to do a fair amount of rationalizing in order to live with the balancing act we are required to pull off.

Here's my favorite rationalization of all time. It's from a letter the colonial leader, (eventual 2<sup>nd</sup> president of the US, John Adams, wrote to his wife, Abigail, in 1780: "I must study Politicks and War [so] that my sons may have liberty to study Mathematicks and Philosophy. My sons [in turn] ought to study Mathematicks and Philosophy, Geography, natural History and Naval Architecture, navigation, Commerce and Agriculture, in order to give *their* Children a right to study Painting, Poetry, Musick, Architecture, Statuary, Tapestry and Porcelaine." I just adore that. There is a man who rationalizes his present state, but with perfectly unselfish vision in doing it. Amazing.

I want to go back to Jeremiah and his youthful insecurity – his making an excuse to opt out of a calling based on his age. Maybe the difference between those who find their road to happiness and those who struggle along forever has something to do with what we experience *after* we have made excuses about being too small to others or ourselves. Here is an allegory about this that I find very useful ...

*Power, made me a coat. For a long time I kept it in the back of my closet. I didn't like to wear it much, but I always took good care of it. When I first started wearing it again, it smelled like mothballs. As I wore it more, it started fitting better. ... I was afraid if I wore the coat too much someone would want to take it or else I would accidentally leave it in the dressing room. But it has my name on the label now, and it really doesn't fit anyone else. When people ask me where I found such a becoming garment, I tell them about the tailor, Power, who knows how to make coats that you grow into.*

*First, you must have the courage to approach him and ask him to make you the coat. Then, you must find the patience inside yourself to wear the coat until it fits" (Ruth Gendler in *The Book of Qualities*, p. 26).*

Think of it -- power (or agency) defined as a coat that is woven for you and that you wear until you grow into it.

I imagine no one who becomes president of this country fits the *power* coat immediately. I remember John Kennedy, being candid about the fact that he had to grow into it. He was anything but ready in January of 1961, age 43. The fiasco at the Bay of Pigs was proof of that.

I suppose even Abraham Lincoln would have said the same thing. He slunk into Washington D.C. in disguise with Allan J. Pinkerton at his side, warned that he might be assassinated before he was even inaugurated. He regretted that show of cowardice until the day he died. Maybe only Franklin Roosevelt entered the presidency at full stature. He had to. The nation was in desperate trouble and it needed a first-class captain to steady a sinking ship.

No matter what job we sign up for, be it a profession or a volunteer position, there is the necessary period of getting up to speed.

I am so grateful for the people in three different churches I began serving between the ages of 22 and 29. I was just plain not ready in any of those situations. They were so very patient. They knew that they were training me; that seminary was just the most rudimentary of trade schools.

The most critical learning any of us acquires comes not from any university, or course of study, right? It is learned on the job. We either measure up, or we scrub out, depending on a number of factors that are absolute requirements – patience with ourselves so we can weather our inevitable failures, teachability, the ability to listen to others, to be mentored by appropriate mentors that we find by the grace of God. We need to learn the difference between mere information and gaining good judgment.

One other thing the people in those small out-of-the-way churches that trained me had to make their peace with was this: they knew they were training me, **not** for their church, but for work I would take on years down the road – in larger towns and larger churches – like this one.

They knew that the best I would eventually have to offer, they would never see. They might get a glimpse, but for them it was central to their calling as entry level situations.

Our church Nominating Committee is at work now, getting deacons and elders to serve this church for the next three years. My hope is that at Southminster we give people volunteer opportunities to stretch them – to do work they have maybe always wanted to do, but never had a chance to in their career settings.

What coat may God be calling you to try on? Now, remember, don't worry if the sleeves are too long ... at first. Jeremiah clearly got over his youthful self-doubt and grew into his coat very nicely.

When interviewing for my previous pastorate, sizing up my last church in Utah, I saw a quote from the writings of Marianne Williamson beautifully painted on one wall of their Youth Room.

The youth director could not have chosen a more appropriate word for young people who are tempted to say every day to themselves what shy Jeremiah said, "I am only a youth ..."

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world.”

Amen

*I owe a debt to the Rev John Buchanan for being the source for my take on this sermon.*