

Protagonist Corner

On Being Called

Ordination Sermon for Christopher Myers

Jer. 1:1-12; Mark 6:7-13

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On the Sistine Chapel ceiling, Michelangelo has given to the ages an extraordinary painting of the prophet Jeremiah. He is seated with his legs crossed at the ankles, his feet and legs covered with boots. He is garbed in a loose-fitting robe, which drapes over his knees, and sags between them. His left forearm rests on his left thigh, and the hand droops sharply from the wrist. Michelangelo perceived Jeremiah to be a man with big bones; his wrists are thick. His right elbow is perched on his right knee, and the gnarled, rawboned hand holds a somewhat bowed head—his nose resting between the thumb and forefinger, his mouth covered. Three fingers are lost in a scraggly gray beard. His hair looks disheveled, almost unkempt. The bow of the head to the right keeps us from seeing fully the eyes. They are, it appears, almost closed. The sockets of his eyes are deeply lined, and the brow is deeply furrowed.

Michelangelo's Jeremiah expresses a depth of spirit, a profundity of human reflection. He makes Rodin's famous *The Thinker* look like a man who never suffered, never anguished, never doubted. Many and different passages from the book of Jeremiah flood one's memory when one meditates on that posture, that face. It reflects neither peace nor ecstasy: it is brooding. Yet it is not the face of an angry man, cursing the day on which he was born. One can see in it the face of a man who says and does nothing lightly, whose vocation and responsibilities have utmost seriousness. Their weight is clearly evident, but something other than mere resignation to them is portrayed. But it is not sorrow, or grief. If one compares it with the paintings of Isaiah, or Daniel, or Zechariah or other prophets on the ceiling of the chapel, there is no mistake about who it represents.

Who knows if Michelangelo had a particular text from the book of Jeremiah in mind? His Jeremiah is older, more seasoned than the one who says "I am only a youth." But he could have had in mind other passages from the lesson that was read. It is not hard to imagine Michelangelo's Jeremiah pondering what it means to have the word of the Lord come to him saying, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." It is not hard to imagine him feeling and thinking about his awesome ordination charge: "See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." It is not hard to imagine that Michelangelo is portraying Jeremiah *before* the anguished frustration that led him at one point to say, "Cursed be the day on which I was born! The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed! Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, 'A son is born to you,' making him very glad." It is also not hard to imagine him to be portraying Jeremiah *after* that outburst of violent blasphemy, when a moment of repose—but yet disturbed repose—comes over him and he thinks again about his ordination charge.

What is clear from our text from the prophetic book, and equally vivid from Michelangelo's painting, is the totality of being called by God. It is a call to a particular person in a particular time—remember the particularity of the opening sentences of the text. Chris Myer's vocation is not Jeremiah's, but it is not without some similarities. The totality of being called by God! Think of Jeremiah! Here is no technician, competent to analyze the struggles between the nations with the equivalent in his day of a data bank of information about warheads and economic productivity, about public opinion and negotiation procedures. Here is no disinterested rational mind, seeking to find the universal principles that might determine what justice requires in that particular, very particular historical time. Here is no leader of a seminar discussing the logical cogency of a theological argument. Here is no community organizer armed with the wisdom of Saul Alinsky developing the concentrations of power to fight the city halls of the time. Here is no pastoral therapist eliciting emancipations from moral inhibitions so that self-fulfillment becomes a major aim of the religious and moral life. Here is no mystic disciplining his posture and his breathing, or ingesting foreign substances to achieve a peak experience of the Divine. Here is no historian, or no participant observer, recording in detail the events for the sake of giving softly valid principles by which they can be explained.

Here is the totality of vocation! Passionate, integrated, reflective, active, under the awesome charge of God. What a fate! What a destiny! What a life for Jeremiah—to believe that he was known by God before his conception, and consecrated before his birth. To be charged with being over nations and kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant. How else could Michelangelo have portrayed him than he did! And to have experienced buffeting opposition to his mission, to perceive and declare what is the right only to have it ignored, to become so deeply frustrated that he curses the day when his mother bore him. Rodin's *The Thinker* could never appropriately portray Jeremiah. There is a weight, a centering of the totality of life, in response to the call of God, an ultimate seriousness, an integration of our deepest passions, our profoundest reflections, and our most energetic activity.

Chris, your vocation, like mine and probably every ordained minister is both easier and more difficult than Jeremiah's calling. You have never told me that God called you to the ministry before your conception, and consecrated you before your birth. You can no doubt look back on your life, and reconstruct it in such a way that this service is not an accident, but a necessary culmination of events that happened to you, or your assent to things against which you could have rebelled, and of thoughtful choices you have made. Indeed, such had better be the case! There is a sense of the necessity of this hour. There is a kind of rightness to it, a kind of wholeness and appropriateness to it, a kind of assenting to the past, a kind of moment of fulfillment as a central aspect of life. It is not like deciding whether to take your vacation in Michigan or in France. It is not like choosing to read a novel, or a theological book. It is an assent to a course of events and a course of choices, a coming together in a moment of a unity of purpose out of the past and directed toward the future.

But, thanks be to God that neither you nor I need to live with the certitude that Jeremiah had of his vocation. Known before our conceptions, consecrated before our births! While I hope that in this hour you can passionately say, "It could not be otherwise," I know that you can look back and properly say "It could have been otherwise." Poor Jeremiah! The bind he was in! So sure, and to be charged with such

a powerful mission. No wonder he could curse the day on which his mother bore him. Our vocation is easier—but not much.

And thanks be to God that no one is today going to give you the ordination charge Jeremiah heard. No one is appointing you a prophet *to the nations*, to pluck up and break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant. To pluck up and break down, Yes! To pluck up the weeds of fatuous Christian thinking, to pluck up the superficiality of what the Christian life means to people, to break down those habits and customs that are impediments to the signs of true spirituality and true morality, to cogent reflection on the meaning of our faith, Yes! To destroy and overthrow—maybe—but surely not the nations. To call into question, at least, those preoccupations in our culture with narcissistic self-gratification, those overextending activities of humans which violate our appropriate place in the nature of things, those preoccupations with intellectual, bureaucratic, and social pettiness that keep the spirit from flourishing, Yes! To build and to plant, Yes! To plant, water, fertilize, and in every way cultivate those conditions of life which make for appropriate human relations, for a livable society, a just ordering of life. To participate in the building of institutions—churchly and community—which serve the end to which you were called and now shall be ordained, Yes! Our vocation is easier than Jeremiah's—but not much.

It is the margin of uncertainty of your vocation, and the margin of uncertainty about its task that makes it easier. But what makes it easier also makes it harder. Objectively Jeremiah could not be in doubt; you and I can. Subjectively, Jeremiah's objective certainty made despair—cursing the day on which his mother gave birth to him—the only alternative. We can find options, options for ministry, which the definiteness of his charge did not give him.

The account read from the Gospel of Mark opens itself to the same theme. Both you and I know that we ought not to read lives of Jesus by novelists, since we have been schooled to doubt whether any such thing can be written. But New Testament scholars do not nourish our spirits. The Japanese Roman Catholic novelist, Shusako Endo, a man who is of considerable importance as a literary figure, has alas done once again what we are told is dangerous, if not impossible, to do. Some years ago, he gave us *A Life of Jesus*. It is spiritually and theologically penetrating, and enriching to read.

He set the commissioning of the disciples in the context of a narrative of *discovery* of vocation—not only that of the disciples, but that of Jesus himself. It is at least plausible, but more importantly, it is religiously powerful. Disappointment and uncertainty are two of Endo's major themes. In his ministry in Galilee, Jesus attracts the crowds as he goes from place to place, speaking, acting. But he also disappoints the crowds that he attracts. He never quite fits the expectations they have of him. He is not a zealot who will lead the political rebellion against the occupation of the Romans, though there are signs that this concerns him. He is sufficiently a threat to the established political and religious authorities so that they constantly attend his meetings and harass him. He might upset the delicate balance of relations between Roman authorities and the religious authorities that provides the measure of peace autonomy that the nation has. Indeed, if I read Endo correctly, Jesus comes gradually to a shaping of his mission. He is ineffectual and uncertain, and must go off by himself to examine painfully and prayerfully just what he is called to be and to do. Like most of us, it is clearer what he is not to be and to do than what he is to be and to do.

And here we have the disciples. Many who followed him in Galilee have fallen

away in disappointment. Those whom the tradition calls the disciples surely shared in this perplexity. Who was this Jesus, really? What was his purpose, really? Why did he not meet the expectations of the crowds? Why did he not simply be the prophet John the Baptist was, calling to repentance? Why did he consort with persons of ill-repute? From where came the courage to dispute his learned questioners? When a mass movement of the favored poor and oppressed seemed possible, why did Jesus not follow through? Who was he? What was his mission?

As Endo tells the story, the religious and theological hindsight that even the gospel writers could have was not available to this motley crew of Galileans. And here they are, called to a mission, called upon to bring a message to people when they could not really be sure what the message was. Indeed, Mark records in the third chapter of his Gospel, where the traditional twelve are named, that after sending them out, Jesus went home. And Endo sees the story of the calling and naming of the twelve to take place under circumstances in which Jesus himself was either not clear about it, or not ready to disclose fully his purpose.

Jesus had gone up into the hills—he seemed frequently to go to the hills to anguish, pray, ponder, come to some certitude about his own purpose. And what training did he give the disciples? Hardly a divinity degree from Candler School of Theology! Hardly a year of internship at Central Congregational Church. Hardly the intellectual certainty that there could be a sound philosophical foundation for Christian theology. He was, Endo says, preparing them for hardship. Their uncertainties were many—not merely that they did not have a housing allowance and a pension plan and health insurance. They had insight, but not full disclosure; they had a deep commitment that also had its doubts; they were given a charge but did not fully grasp its meaning.

How like this rich narrative and reflection is your ministry and mine? How do we speak and write about something to which much of the world is indifferent, and some of it hostile? How do we become clear even about the full significance of what we say when we, like the disciples, are only discovering what that might be? How can we plan ahead when disappointments and surprises force us to take into account things we felt were settled? About our lives, about our ideas, about those whom we teach and to whom we minister in other ways? How can we be sure we are committing our lives to something worthy to become their center and integrating focus, worthy to be the final end of everything we do professionally?

We cannot be sure of all these things. We are called to be as sure as we can be, but we are not given the certitude that would most relieve all anxiety. We are called to be as prepared as we can be, but our charge is to a vocation with deep risks. We are called to be as prudent as we can be in our planning, but we are not the masters of events and thus we must have courage and hope. Your calling and mine, Chris, are not unlike those of the early followers of Jesus.

And yet, with Jeremiah and the disciples fully in mind, there is a deep, profound, integrating power, a kind of sureness that cannot be fully expressed, in your personal vocation, and in the lives of us who have been called—by God and by the church. The Spirit moves mightily through you and through the church in this hour. When you rise from your knees in a few minutes, I hope and believe you will be able to affirm in your heart that much of your life is brought together in wholeness, focus of purpose, and zeal. That you will be able to affirm in the depths of your being that there is a source of sustaining power and satisfaction that not only bears you up in uncertainty and

adversity, but that promises fulfillment of your extraordinary talents and capacities. I hope and deeply believe you will rise from your knees and be able to affirm in your heart that this hour *had to be*, that it is right and good, and that the strange guidance of Almighty God that brings you to your knees here, will sustain and enrich your life, and the lives of those with whom you work.

Now unto him that is able to keep us from falling, and to present us faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen.