

Epiphany 4C – “To all whom I send you you shall go, and whatever I command you you shall speak.” Jer. 1.7

There is nothing so inopportune as a call. Things have gotten much better since the government established the no-call phone list. Before its enactment, the phone began ringing at about three in the afternoon and wouldn't stop until nine in the evening. Family dinners, set aside for quiet fellowship with spouse and children were punctuated by the ringing of the phone, to the point that we would often take the phone off the hook during dinner hours. This is the thing to do when you don't want to receive the inopportune and uninvited call.

But what if you couldn't take the phone off the hook, and the one on the other end of the line wouldn't observe the no-call hours. Instead, the caller called round the clock. And it didn't matter where you went; you could always hear the phone ringing. To make matters even worse, the caller was going to ask you to do something that you absolutely didn't want to do.

Jeremiah found himself in this very predicament. There were no phones and no telemarketers in the 7c BC. It was God who was calling, and he would not take “no” for an answer. The true God had a message that he wanted Jeremiah to give to his people Israel, and Jeremiah didn’t want to give it. It was a bitter message, it was a cheerless message, and in giving it Jeremiah would ruin his own life. But God kept calling.

Perhaps God had the wrong number? Could it be that God had made a mistake? Jeremiah responded to the call that he was only a youth. It may have been that Jeremiah was a young man, but it is more likely that Jeremiah was pleading his own inability in these deep matters. Like a youth, Jeremiah said that he was weak and uncertain and unable to bear this mighty burden that the Lord wanted to place upon him. There must have been some mistake. God must have been looking for someone else. The Lord had called the wrong number.

But God in his omniscience cannot call the wrong number. If God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-present he cannot get the wrong person. He said to Jeremiah, “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 wasn’t enough that God knew Jeremiah in his current location, at his current age, and current employment. No, the Lord had known Jeremiah before he was Jeremiah. Before he had been conceived God had predestined him to be his mouthpiece to the nation of Israel.

But Jeremiah was weak and young and didn’t speak well in public. His stage fright was an obstacle to the Lord’s plans. Perhaps God could call back at another time when Jeremiah had developed into the prophet that God was seeking? In our market driven society, this might have seemed a reasonable response to the request. We, who are constantly hiring or seeking to hire qualified personnel would be the first to make an objection such as this. The human resource director says, “I’m sorry Mr. Morse, you don’t have the particular college degrees and work experience that we are looking for to fill this position. Thank you for your time.” But we would be mistaken if we thought that God worked that way. Instead, we see, that God gives what he asks us for. The great doctor of the Church, St. Augustine wrote to God, “Give me what you ask for, and then ask of me

whatever you want.” In this same manner, God put forth his hand and touched Jeremiah’s mouth and said to him, “Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.” Who can speak for God? The Psalmist wrote, “Out of the mouth of babies and infants, you have established strength because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger.” And again St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.” Jeremiah may have been weak and foolish, but it was God who had called him to prophesy, and he would give him the words to speak and the will to do it.

To whom would Jeremiah deliver this divine message? The Lord said to him, “See, I have set you this day over the nations and over kingdoms.” Now we may rightly ask how this was to be? Jeremiah did not prophesy among all the nations. He preached only to the Israelites, and only those of the tribe of Judah that remained around the city of Jerusalem. The 10 northern tribes had been carried away into Assyria a century before. But Jeremiah was to prophesy the

words of God against the nations of Assyria, Babylonia, Egypt and of Judah. He had been given the divine message against them and so he had been given authority over them. He had been given the oracle of judgment, of destruction and of restoration. Those who resisted the will of God and his righteousness would be thrown down. But the faithful ones would know his blessings. Even so the Lord gave these words to Jeremiah for Judah, “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” Though he was small and weak, Jeremiah would receive authority over the nations; to break down and to build up.

But it is not only Jeremiah that has been called to ministry, but we too have been given the task of bringing light to a dark world. Yes, Jeremiah had a particular call to a particular people, at a particular time. But we, the Church, who have reaped the field that he sowed, who have received the promised Spirit, even as Jeremiah prophesied, have ministry as well. God has known each of us before we were born and has providentially guided us to this day. He has called us by his name at our baptisms and he has placed his word in our hands and upon our lips.

But we, like Jeremiah, may object to his inopportune and persistent call. Though not too many of us here are young, we may refuse on the basis of our age. We aren't as spry as we once were. If God had wanted to make missionaries out of us he should have called a few years back! But it isn't simply that we aren't what we once were, but neither is our community. Yes, the Golden Years of the Parish, when the pews were full and children ran the halls in herds; those were the good old days! We were really doing ministry then. Or were we? Certainly all things from the hand of the Lord, and that includes the building, and the membership and the children. But has the need for ministry really changed between that grand time and our more modest era? I think not. For the ministry is not ours, even as the word is not ours. It is the Lord's call and it is the Lord's word. Ah, you may say, but the neighborhood has changed. It has a different population that don't even speak the same language in so many cases. Do they speak Assyrian, Babylonian or Egyptian? Neither did Jeremiah. But the Lord gave him authority over them, to speak the word of the Lord to them. Has he not also given us that same authority over the nations in our Lord Jesus Christ? For Paul wrote the Ephesians, "The Father raised Christ from the dead and made him sit at this right hand in the

heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but in that age which is to come.” Yes, we have been given a word to speak that is not ours; it is the Lord’s. It is a word about Christ’s victory over sin, death and the grave. It is a word about our victory over wrath and jealousy; lust and vice. It is a word about slaves set free and wars come to an end. My dear friends, hear the call of Almighty God and do not reject it! Give glory to God and the ministry he has given you in this place. Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. AMEN