

SAMPLE ARTICLE

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NO PREPARATION NEEDED FOR GOD'S CALL

by Ron Farr
Laity Empowerment Project

Our Strategy of "Disappearing"

Nobody's hand went up. The students nervously slouched further down into their chairs, riveting their eyes to the floor, to avoid the teacher's gaze as it swept across the room like a search beam. The teacher had asked the class a tough question and was looking for someone to answer. The students feverishly prayed under their breath, *"Please don't see me! Please don't pick me!"* as they strained to become invisible. Avoiding any motion that might draw attention to themselves, they each hoped to appear like an anonymous wave in a confusing sea of desks bobbing before the teacher.

This strategy of silent "disappearing" which we so instinctively learned during our school years is what we often do when we are nervous about someone asking us to do something we aren't prepared to do. Our faith journey is no exception. How much of this silent withdrawal, this fear of raising your hand, do you bring into your relationship with God?

In Isaiah 6:8, Isaiah records, *"I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?'"* Perhaps you have heard God whispering words like these to you when you have uncovered an injustice at work, learned of a neighbor who just received some bad medical news, discovered someone who is lonely or just needs to talk, heard a racist or sexist comment, found yourself in the midst of backbiting gossip, or recognized that the spiritual life of your church is a little stale. *"Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?"* In what situations has God spoken these words to you? And what has been your response? Do you slump down in your chair, trying to blend into the woodwork? Or, do you sit up, eagerly wave your hand, and say as Isaiah did, *"Here am I; send me!"*

This whole line of questioning can make us nervous. Many of us have adopted a bad habit of dismissing ourselves as serious instruments of Christ in our workplaces and world. Indeed, many of us are so confident about our inadequacies and limitations, we just assume that when a ministry needs doing, God looks right past us to those whom we would consider more "gifted" or "special."

Though we identify ourselves as followers of Jesus, we somehow assume that Jesus called the first disciples into more serious discipleship than he calls us, his modern-day disciples. We forget that the first disciples were ordinary folks just like us: homemakers, fishermen, tax collectors, people with problems, people with uneven temperaments, men and women who did not always understand or stand by what Jesus was teaching. It is sometimes hard for us to believe that God calls all of us ordinary, unimpressive folks into intentional ministries as thoroughly as God called the prophets.

Feeling “Not Ready” for God’s Call

Jeremiah was a young and immature man when God came to him and said, *“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”* Jeremiah was shocked to hear how seriously God valued his life and gifts, and he recoiled at the thought that his young, teenage self was being named “a prophet.” He cried out, *“Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy”* (Jer 1:6).

Jeremiah simply did not feel ready to speak for God. He felt too young, unprepared, and inexperienced. He was overwhelmed by God’s plans for him. However, when he said, *“I’m only a boy,”* he was not necessarily saying that he never wanted to serve God. Rather, he was saying, *“I’m not quite ready to serve you now, God, in such a demanding way. What do I know? I need more time to grow up before I can take on this kind of mission.”*

Like young Jeremiah, we often think of ourselves as still “not quite ready,” still too young in faith, still needing more time before we take on the “adult” responsibilities of responding fully to God’s leadings. For the time being, our lives feel too disorganized, too stressed-out, too full of pressure and deadlines to do anything significant for God. Our nerves are frayed. Our relationships are ragged. We’re nervous about where the money is going to come from to pay our bills. We get depressed easily. We have a hard time controlling our anger or our anxiety.

We can hardly get ourselves and our children to church on Sunday mornings. We often forget all about our spiritual life during the work week. We feel beat-up or used- up from the daily grind. We have a cold or a sore throat. Our priorities aren’t totally clear. Sometimes, it is just an effort to be civil, even with our loved ones. We are doing too much, and people keep asking us to do more. We simply cannot jam one more thing into our schedule. We just need a break!

“So,” we think to ourselves, *“how could God possibly call ME to be a more committed disciple, to be more engaged in a focused ministry? No way! I’m not ready for that! Who’s kidding whom? I can barely get through the week!”* It’s not that we, like Jeremiah, are telling God that we never want to serve God whole-heartedly. It’s just that for the time being we feel we have our hands full trying to work out our problems, reform our bad habits, smooth out our relationships, settle our finances, heal our wounds, tighten things up, and get clearer about our faith and our values. We simply don’t see how we can significantly respond to God’s calls until we reach a higher level of spiritual and moral functioning. We assume that God gingerly avoids calling us into serious Christian discipleship while we are detained by our various fears, weaknesses, and dysfunctions.

Though such well constructed excuses may sound reasonable enough, the Biblical record does not show God following this line of thinking. After hearing Jeremiah’s claim that he was too young and inexperienced to do what God was asking, God said, *“Do not say, ‘I am only a boy.’ ...I have put my words in your mouth”* (Jer 1:7-9). God did not wait for Jeremiah to grow up. God did not wait for the young teenage girl Mary to mature before carrying Jesus in her womb. And Jesus did not wait for Peter and Andrew to tidy up their fishing nets before he said, *“Follow me.”* There was no preparation for any of these folks. God simply walked into their lives and started working with them just as they were.

We are no different. God doesn’t wait for us to get prepared, improve, slow down, feel better about ourselves, or become more confident. God enters into the rawness and mess of our lives, and there, right where we are, calls us to whatever action we need to take. We are called whether we are wounded or healed, burned-out or refreshed. There is no state of being that is exempt from

God's calling. We cannot put God off by saying, *"I'm not strong enough," "I'm not ready," or "I can't deal with any more pressure!"*

God Who Calls Us is the God Who Comforts Us

What we usually do not realize is that God takes care of us. We don't have to "protect" ourselves from God. God does not mercilessly heap more and more challenges upon us until we have a heart attack. God understands our need for healing, and balance, and peace. God's call to act compassionately, to share good news, to oppose injustice is only one side of God's call. God also has much to say to us about how to manage, restore, and pace our lives. If there are homeless folks or lonely elderly in our community, God may call us to care for them. In the same manner, if there is crippling stress or lack of confidence within us, God may call us to take time to heal these wounds.

As we develop our relationship with God, we begin to realize that the God who calls us into challenging ministries is the same God who comforts us. The God who nudges us is the same God who nurtures us. This was Jeremiah's experience. The God who said to Jeremiah, *"I appointed you a prophet to the nations"* also said, *"Do not be afraid,... for I am with you to deliver you"* (Jer 1:5-8). The same Jesus who said, *"Go and make disciples of all nations"* (Mt 28:19) also said, *"Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"* (Mt 11:28).

God's call is not something "extra" that we slip into our already busy schedules. It is not an "interruption" of what we normally do. It is not even "doing one's part" or fulfilling one's obligations at church or any other place. God's call is the basic organizing principle of our lives. It wells up from our deepest priorities and inspirations, and determines how we manage our time, focus our energies, relate to others, organize our day, and make plans for the future.

Our sense of call slowly rises to the surface over time as we establish a relationship with God, based on the trust that God ministers to us as much as God calls us to minister to others. As we consistently seek to be attentive to the ways God is directing us in our everyday struggles and decisions, our lives and schedules cannot help but slowly be reorganized.

Day by day, God calls to us to weed out what is extraneous or self-destructive, cultivate deeper priorities, heal our broken memories, use our time wisely, work through fears that paralyze us, open our hearts, deepen our prayer, raise up our compassion, and minister to people and situations that God throws into our laps. As we submit to this divine molding like clay placed in a potter's hand, our lives undergo a subtle but fundamental shift. We are slowly shaped into an instrument of ministry, each in our own image, each according to the gifts God has given us and according to the fires of concern that God has planted in our hearts. God gradually teaches us who we are, whom we can help, what ministries we were built to do, what ministries we are already carrying out, and how to keep our inner house in order so that we can blossom and burn brightly in our outward Christian service.

(to be continued ...)