

God's Words in Our Mouths

How early in life did you know what you wanted to be when you grew up? A teacher? An agronomist? A butcher? A banker? A medical services provider? A farmer?

I was a freshman college when I decided I wanted to teach classical guitar at a major university. Which just goes to show that our plans sometimes change. And as people of faith we have to ask, who's behind the changes in our plans? What role does God play in our vocational choices?

You may be aware that Tabor College has a special, campus-wide emphasis on vocation, that is, in listening for God's call to us in our lives. Doug Miller played a significant role in introducing this emphasis, which includes having all students write a personal mission statement during their junior year, and then a paper on that mission statement in their senior year. I think that is both admirable and awesome, on Tabor College's part.

But back to you. Why did you choose the job you did? What role did God play in that?

I've found myself thinking especially about those of you who are teachers. I've heard some of you describe it as an annual period of anguish when your summer break comes to an end, and you face once again the prospect of returning to school. Almost as if you have to choose it all over again. "Why did I ever decide I wanted to be a teacher? Do I really want to teach again this year? O-kay, I guess I do."

"Now the word of the Lord came to me," Jeremiah begins. What even is that, the "word" of the Lord? Is it just one word? Is it a longer, larger message of some kind? Might it be another way of talking about God's call?

Let's listen to more of God's words to Jeremiah: *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you."* Astonishing statement! It reminds us of Psalm 139. Of how intimately God knows each one of us. Of how God actually knitted us together, in our mother's womb. Of how there is nowhere we can go to hide from God, to get away from God.

"Before you were born I consecrated you." I wasn't quite sure what the word "consecrate" meant, so I looked it up. Listen to these definitions: "to induct a person into a permanent office; to make or declare sacred; to devote irrevocably to the worship of God; to make inviolable or venerable." Sounds pretty terrifying.

Then God drops the bombshell on Jeremiah: *"I appointed you a prophet to the nations."* And how does Jeremiah respond? *"Ah, Lord God!"* That word "ah" is a favorite especially of the prophets in the Old Testament. The word in Hebrew is pronounced "aha!" It is often translated as "alas." It is, in other words, a word of dismay, and even anguish. I can hear teachers saying at this time of year, "Ah, Lord God! School starts in a week. And I'm not ready!"

Jeremiah further expresses his despair by adding: *"Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."* How's that for an excuse? Make that two excuses. "I don't know how to speak," and "I am only a boy." [Show *picture* from bulletin.] Is that what this "boy" is saying, on the back cover of our bulletin? He's at least old enough to have facial hair. But his eyes look terrified.

What are your excuses, when God's word comes to you? I'm too young! Or for some of us, I'm too old! I don't have time! I'm too tired. I'm really not very good at that! I'd really rather not! Can't you ask someone else?

And how does the Lord God respond to our excuses? "*Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you.*" In other words, no excuses. And there's no place to hide. No escaping God's call to us. Whether we're a "butcher, a baker, a candlestick maker," or a teacher. (And I might add, a preacher.)

Notice again the emphasis on God's word . . . or rather, in this case, God's words, plural; God's message; whatever God commands us to speak. I mean, here we have these mouths that God has given us. And God commands us what we are to say with them. The message we are to speak.

Think of all the ways we use our mouths every day. As part of our job, our vocation. Teachers, for sure. Along with preachers. But really, any job. Any vocation. Including our retirement!

Our mouths have tremendous power. Both for good, and for bad. Think of all the things that come out of our mouths. Curses as well as blessings. Criticisms as well as compliments. And often, scarily, without even thinking about it. Makes us wonder, what would happen if we would stop and ask ourselves, every time before we speak, "Now what does God want me to say in this moment?" Think of how much difference such thoughtfulness could make. Whether you're a butcher, a baker, or a teacher. Or, a preacher.

The thing is, God doesn't ask us to only be nicey-nicey all the time. There are apparently some "hard things" God wants us to say. Listen to how God further specifies his call to Jeremiah: "*See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.*" No wonder prophets aren't always the most popular people in our social circles. No wonder some of us choose vocations where we won't have to speak a lot. Or so we think. We all use our mouths all the time.

I'm not saying we are all called to be prophets. We're not. The Apostle Paul says as much in his letter to the Corinthians—"Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles?" The implied answer being "no." But, we are all called. God gave us all mouths. God puts his words on every pair of our lips.

For sure, at least some of the time, God calls us to use your mouths to "pluck up and pull down, to destroy and to overthrow." And that's scary! Terrifying, more like. *[Picture]* We can't help but wonder, how will my words today be received? Which is why God says to Jeremiah, "*Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you.*" Remember, God consecrated us. God put us together. There is nowhere we can go that God is not.

But let us at least take comfort that God's final words of instruction are "*to build and to plant.*" As if that represents the most important part of God's word that we are to share with the world. As if every time we open our mouths, our final words to others, to whomever we're speaking with, are to be words of encouragement, and hope, and promise. Perhaps something like this: "Don't forget: God isn't done with you yet. God loves you. And I love you."

I don't know . . . teachers, can you see yourselves saying that to your students at the end of every school day, as they exit your classroom?

Here, let me practice on you. "Now don't forget, my friends at First Mennonite Church: God isn't done with you yet. God loves you. And I love you." I guess that's not so terrifying after all!

Amen.