

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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*"Now I have put my words in your mouth.
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."*

Have you ever put your finger in an electrical outlet? Or maybe put your tongue on the end of a nine volt battery because your sadistic older cousin told you it would feel funny? Or maybe you've been in the dentist's chair when she's blithely drilling away and grazes a nerve? I'm guessing you have, at some point in your lives, felt a shock.

Jeremiah, boy prophet, finds himself in a back and forth conversation with Almighty God. God has inexplicably appeared to Jeremiah and let him know that the boy would become a prophet to God's people. Jeremiah is understandably reluctant and lets God know that boys are too young for this kind of work. God is undeterred and touched Jeremiah's mouth so that Jeremiah can begin speaking God's word to all the nations of the world.

The word that the author is using there is translated into English as touch. God touched Jeremiah's mouth. But that doesn't really give a sense of what is happening. In Hebrew, the word comes with a sense of power, of urgency, sometimes even of violence. Shock would be better, or maybe even disturbed. God shocked Jeremiah's mouth. And Jeremiah's protests fell away.

I hope it's easy to see yourself in Jeremiah's position. Or Moses for that matter—any of the great people of God who found themselves reluctant to answer God's call. They usually give a reason—too old, too young, not a good speaker, not the right time. And, in these stories, God simply isn't having it. God shocks the reluctance right out of their mouths.

When the church forms priests, deacons, and bishops, we constantly ask the people preparing for these offices to tell their story of call. In fact, we ask for it so often, most of us have the story down to a three sentence elevator pitch about how we got into the God gig in the first place. I suspect that we have done a disservice to the church at large by spending so much time on the call stories of the clergy and not nearly enough time on the call stories of the laity. It's rank arrogance to think that God only has something to say to people who wear funny clothes at the front of the church. Our God is cleverer than that.

What is the shape and the tone of your call? When did God speak to you and what was the topic? Was your response like Mary and Isaiah—"Yes, Lord; send me!" Or was your response more like Moses or Jeremiah—"God, here are all the reasons I will not be able to answer your call

today.” Did you, like Jeremiah, experience a shock, a moment when you knew you had to speak God’s words?

I’m no expert in theology. I took the classes, but I didn’t have a great mind for the mechanics of salvation or the finer points of the liturgy. But I do remember a few things clearly. I remember that God is in the business of calling us into service. You have, undoubtedly, been called by God to serve God’s people. I don’t know the specifics. But I can’t believe that you were brought into this place, cleansed by baptism, and fed by the Eucharist to just tread water. God has something in mind for you, and I’d be excited to know what it is.

And if you, like me, sometimes show some reluctance—or come up with excellent reasons why you can’t answer God’s call, then I imagine God will be kind enough to shock our mouths.

The reluctance in the Jeremiah story is singular, but I wonder if it can be corporate as well. Can we, as a community of God followers, be called to a certain task? And can we, as a community, be reluctant? I think the answer might be yes. We can all too easily, as a church, say to God that we don’t have enough time, or enough money, or enough energy to answer the call. And in fact, I can look around at lots of churches who happily say no to God’s call for lots of reasons.

What if God shocks us out of “no we can’t” into “we’re going to make it work?” What if we suck on that nine volt, get wide awake, and get to the business of serving God’s people?

I’ll admit that I’m scared. I know what we’re all supposed to do here on Sunday morning. I mean, we print everything in the bulletin—even when to stand and when to sit. But what are we supposed to do on Monday morning? What is God calling us to do, and how are we going to answer?

I’ll reiterate that I don’t know the specifics of either your personal call or our call as a parish. But every prophet ever sent out into the world was sent out to preach the gospel of release to the captives, destruction to the oppressor, and kindness to the stranger. If we start there, we can’t go too far wrong. Where are the vulnerable places within walking distance of our church? Where are the cracks in the fabric of this city? Who is out in the world using their power to make the lives of the weak miserable? That’s where we need to start.

I read an interview of a woman who was sleeping in a makeshift homeless camp outside on Monday night. The reporter asked her about the coming arctic blast. She said, “I’m cold, and I’m afraid.” The reporter asked why she wasn’t in a shelter, and she said that there are bedbugs, people steal your belongings, and that it’s particularly not safe for women. This is a woman on the outer edges of our society. And this woman is our sister. This woman is beloved of our God. So, while I don’t know the specifics of our call, I know that we are being shocked somehow into her direction. And while I don’t know the specifics of St. Mark’s call, I know that we are being shocked somehow in her direction.

Brace yourself, beloved people of God. You are being called to serve, and that sometimes comes as a shock. Amen.

