

Finding Your Prophetic Voice

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 13:10-17

Rev. Elliott Munn

August 21, 2016

I get asked a lot, "How did you decided to become a minister?" What they really want to hear is my call story. I am not totally sure why, perhaps they don't know many ministers or maybe they think my profession is just weird. Regardless, they want to know why I do what I do.

There are some better ways to tell your story than others. For example, saying you chose the ministry because you were simply a natural or seminary was a convenient way to avoid the draft is not something people will hear favorably. Having known ministers for whom these things were true, it tends to be something they tend to downplay if they bother to mention it at all. For the sake of my own sanity, its best to have a variety of versions prepared ranging from 30 seconds to 10 minutes. Some details should stay reserved for the unabridged version.

For better or for worse, there is a formula into which we expect a good call story to fit. This seems to be true for ministers and many other professions. Here's how it typically goes:

- 1) Someone receives a sign that she is meant to do something.
- 2) That someone denies that she is cut out to do that something.
- 3) She is confronted by the fact that this is what she is meant to do.
- 4) She embraces her destiny.

To review: there's a sign, denial, confrontation, and embrace. I want you now to turn to a person sitting near you, and share the call story of someone who fits this mold. I'll give you 60 seconds. Go.

You probably noticed this is a pattern directly from scripture, including our reading from Jeremiah today. God says, "I have had a plan for you, Jeremiah, since before you were born."

Jeremiah says, "Wait a minute! I'm too young for this."

God then says, "Get over it and lean on my words. I will touch your lips and give you all the words you need. Now go and share the news."

The part of this process I want to focus on this morning is the “denial” phase. This is something nearly everyone, I’m sure, has felt at some point. It’s the part of us that hears God speak and doubts.

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appoint you a prophet to the nation.”

For many of you these are familiar words. Perhaps you have heard them in all sorts of contexts. These words are not meant to shame. God here is reminding Jeremiah that he is precious, blessed, and filled with purpose, even though Jeremiah cannot see that in himself. No matter what doubts are holding you back, God here is reminding us that you too are precious, blessed, and filled with purpose.

There are so many doubts we carry. The doubts from our failures and the failures of others weigh us down. They make us feel small, restricted, compelling us to walk through the world as the woman in today’s Gospel reading. Unlike the woman who grabbed the hem of Jesus’ cloak, Jesus seeks her out and heals her. She is so important in the eyes of God that Jesus willing eschews conventional practice to heal her. This story is not an allegory about exorcizing healthy skepticism, it is about freeing us from the debilitating doubt that keeps us from living with our heads held high and confidently being the person God calls us to be. Healing moments such as these are crucial for overcoming the denial phase of our vocational stories.

Some of you are surely familiar with the life of Pauli Murray. Like the prophet Jeremiah, the Rev. Dr. Murray struggled with her vocational call, but did not let her own doubts or doubts piled onto her by social and religious conventions keep her from being the person God called her to be. This week I stumbled upon the Pauli Murray Project website and a brief profile of her on Salon, reminding me of how much doubt she overcame in her own lifetime. Let me share with you some of her call story.

As a young girl, she lost both of her parents before the age of 14. She went on to become the valedictorian of her high school class, before moving to New York City to attend Hunter College. There she worked her way through school as a teacher and activist in the midst of the Great Depression while struggling with her mental illness, gender identity, and sexual

orientation. In the late 1930s she adopted the name Pauli from her middle name, Pauline, to better align her name with her ambiguous gender identity. She was an early gender non-conformist and also openly maintained romantic relationships with women.

Nevertheless, her challenges could not extinguish her passion to overturn injustice. Following her call she was arrested in 1940 for refusing to give up her seat at the front of a public bus in Virginia, fifteen years before Rosa Parks's arrest sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott. After being rejected from University of North Carolina Law School on account of her race, she followed in the footsteps of numerous other African-American civil rights leaders and enrolled at Howard University. While at Howard in 1943, she submitted her senior thesis entitled, "Should the *Civil Rights Cases* and *Plessy* Be Overruled?" Its original argument that Jim Crow laws were inherently immoral and discriminatory went on to be the foundation of the NAACP's case in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1953.

As a pioneer for women's rights, she drew parallels between racial and gender discrimination as one of the first scholars to argue that the 14th amendment of the constitution protected against gender discrimination.

As her career as a legal scholar approached its end, Murray turned to another calling: the ministry. In 1973, almost 20 years after reading from the Book of Common Prayer to her beloved aunt on her death bed, Murray entered General Seminary in New York City. It was a time before women were officially allowed to become candidates for ordination in the Episcopal Church. In 1977, she became the first African-American woman to be ordained an Episcopal Priest.

Pauli Murray's life was an extraordinary one. In 2012, 25 years after her death, the General Convention of her denomination elevated her to the status of sainthood. This past spring, Yale University, one of her places of graduate study, named a new residential college in her honor.

While Murray's life can be interpreted as a remarkable list of achievements, that fails to acknowledge the self-doubt and challenges she faced. She experienced profound loss and relentless resistance to her work and person. And through it all, Murray leaned on God's grace. In a 1970 poem, she wrote: "Hope is a song in a weary throat. / Give me a song of hope / And a

world where I can sing it. / Give me a song of faith/ And a people to believe in it. / Give me a song of kindness / And a country where I can live it. / Give me a song of hope and love / And a brown girl's heart to hear it."

It is clear from these words and her life story that Murray was someone who took the promise of God's call and healing seriously. Just as Jeremiah and the woman from our Gospel reading, Murray came before God with her whole self, wounds and all, and God gave her inspiration to walk proudly. While individuals and institutions attacked her and weighed her down with their doubts, Murray found in God the right words to offer a prophetic message to a resistant world.

It does not matter how old you are or the magnitude of what you have or have not accomplished. The God who has always known you can still place a call on your life. It is true that we all carry doubts and some manifest themselves more visibly than others. All that said, it's never too late for God to lift your burdens and give you the courage to speak God's prophetic word.

Murray used to say, "One person plus one typewriter constitutes a movement." Changes in technology have only made that more true in the decades since her passing. If God has a message for you to share, there are so many ways to amplify your voice: tweets, snaps, blog posts—we ain't got a mimeograph machine but there's a photocopier upstairs that staples, collates, and gives back massages. So, if you are running out of excuses, you better hurry up. The rest of your story is waiting.

© 2016 Rev. Elliott Munn

First Church
12 South Main Street
West Hartford, CT 06107