

Epiphany 4, Year C

[Jeremiah 1:4-10](#)

[Psalm 71:1-6](#)

[1 Corinthians 13:1-13](#)

[Luke 4:14-30](#)

I'm Only

“Truly, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” I am only a boy. I am only a girl. I am only a regular old ‘yat from New Orleans. I am only a housewife. I’m too young. I’m too old. I’m too shy. I’m too short. I’m not beautiful enough. I’m not rich enough. I’m not smart enough. I’m not good enough. I’m only. We all experience feelings of inadequacy that we try desperately to hide. We’ve all walked into a room of people and felt like we didn’t measure up to everyone around us. We’ve all been invited into situations where we felt like we were out of our league, that we could never live up to the standards being set. Even the seemingly most confident of people—actors, musicians, professional athletes, politicians, and preachers—experience self-doubt, feelings of inadequacy, and while standing tall before the masses are still saying inside, “If only they knew that *I’m only*.”

The prophet Jeremiah powerfully felt this conflict “between the enormity of God’s call and his modest experience.”¹ “Ah, Lord God! Truly, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” Jeremiah was less than 30 years old, and was being asked to stand up as a prophet against empires.² A daunting task, to be sure. The call of the unlikely prophet is a theme found not only in Jeremiah, but throughout scripture. Every prophetic call story forms a similar pattern: God shows up and may say or do something

¹ Bruce Epperly, “Living by the Word,” *The Christian Century*, January 26, 2010, 20.

² Richard J. Clifford, *The Catholic Study Bible, Second Edition*, ed. Donald Senior and John J. Collins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1004-1005.

surprising to get the person's attention; then God says, "I have a job for you." The person says, "Are you kidding me? I'm only" Then God gives them all the same reply: "Don't worry—I've got your back."³

Remember Moses? Moses is out in the desert on Mount Horeb tending sheep for his father-in-law, Jethro, and Moses sees a burning bush that starts talking to him. God in the bush tells him, "You're going to Egypt to tell Pharaoh to let my people go." Moses says, "Are you kidding me? I'm only" God says, "Don't worry—I've got your back." How about Mary? "Mary, you're going to have a baby who will be the Son of God." Mary says, "How can this be since I am a virgin?" "Don't worry about that," Gabriel says. "God's got your back."

On the one hand, to hear this message should be a reminder for us to have confidence in ourselves as the people God made us to be. For you to believe in yourself is an act of faith. As a wise priest once told me, to believe in yourself is, in a sense, to believe in the God who created you and made you who you are. The same is true for believing in others whom God also creates and enables in unique ways.

On the other hand, we should also thank God for the self-doubting prophet. Just as self-confidence is an act of faith, so a healthy level of doubt about one's own abilities and calling is also an act of faith. Imagine God showing up in a burning bush to a cocky, bragging Moses who says, "Well, it's about time you got here! I've known for a long while with utter certainty that I could change the world. Your help? No thanks, I won't be needing any help. I got this! I don't need God's help." Alternatively, imagine an insecure Jeremiah succumbing totally to that self-doubt and saying, "Thanks, but no thanks God.

³ Rebecca Abts Wright, "Form Criticism," lecture delivered to Old Testament Foundations I class, September 12, 2006, University of the South School of Theology, Sewanee, TN.

You've got the wrong person. I'm only a boy, and I don't really believe you can help," and leaving it there. We don't know such stories, because the stories of potential prophets who told God "no" do not survive. Self-doubt can be paralyzing; but healthy doubting, questioning, and a healthy sense of inadequacy or unworthiness can also be signs of faithfulness and spiritual well-being.⁴ Those feelings of inadequacy, the feelings of "I'm only," show a certain humility. By starting with "I'm only," Jeremiah, Moses, Mary, and all the prophets start their journey with God by being humble. Humility is the recognition that despite our gifts we cannot do everything, nor can we do it all alone. We need others, and we particularly need God.

I read an article this week about a new book titled *The Collapse of Parenting* by Dr. Leonard Sax. The interviewer asked Dr. Sax what kinds of things parents can do to help a child or teen become a more fulfilled adult. He said,

The first thing is to teach humility, which is now the most un-American of virtues. When I meet with kids I ask them what they think it is and they literally have no idea. I've done that from third grade through 12th grade. The high school kids are more clueless than the third-graders. They have been indoctrinated in their own awesomeness with no understanding of how this culture of bloated self-esteem leads to resentment. I see it. I see the girl who was told how amazing she was who is now resentful at age 25 because she's working in a cubicle for a low wage and she's written two novels and she can't get an agent.⁵

He might sound a little cynical, but I understand what he means. While our kids—all of us, in fact—need a healthy dose of affirmation and encouragement, that reassurance also needs to be balanced with an understanding of our limits and our need for the support of others. We've been brought up in the last couple of generations being told we can do anything we put our minds to on our own. That's simply not true. We're often

⁴ Epperly, 20.

⁵ Leanne Italie, "Why Kids Today Are Out Of Shape, Disrespectful, And In Charge," *The Kansas City Star*, accessed January 29, 2016, <http://www.kansascity.com/news/nation-world/national/article56473378.html>.

capable of way more than we believe, succumbing to the voice that tells us “I’m only”; the stories of the prophets show that God used the prophet’s latent gifts in ways they could never have imagined with a healthy dose of faith to go along with their feelings of fear and inadequacy. But they were able to do things they never imagined because they were humble, and found that place where, as Frederick Buechner puts it, the gifts that reflect our deepest joys meet the world’s deepest needs.

Jesus’ self-confidence combined with his humility come through in the gospel reading from Luke as he shows that he knows himself and knows his purpose. Jesus has confidence that God has his back, and that the Spirit that is upon him will help him use his gifts as God wills. Having confidence in who you are and what you’re called to do does not mean that you will not experience doubt about yourself, or God, or anything. Even Jesus felt doubt and anguish at Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion; wondered if he could do this; asked God to remove the cup from him. It’s crucial that we understand that the opposite of faith is not doubt. No, the opposite of faith is not doubt, but absolute certainty. Think about it. If we lived lives of absolute certainty about everything, why would we need faith? Faith is about putting your trust and hope in a mysterious power greater than yourself. If you’re absolutely certain you have all the power, then who needs faith?

The people present in the synagogue with Jesus on the first day of his ministry were not doubtful about Jesus, but rather *absolutely certain* about their own perspective. Jesus declares the words of Isaiah to be fulfilled in their hearing, words that proclaim good news to the poor, sight to the blind, and freedom to the captive. They’re okay with that, generally, as Jesus is reading and reinterpreting for them Isaiah’s “messianic job

description.”⁶ Then he reminds them of the great prophets Elijah and Elisha, prophets ignored by Israel, and God’s ministry through them to a foreign widow and the captain of a usurping foreign army. In other words, he tells them that God’s declaration of liberty is not just for them, but even usurpers and foreigners, and in fact holds up this foreign woman and foreign usurper—Gentiles—as models of faith, worthy of emulation.⁷ This is too much for the dogmatists in the synagogue that day to handle; they are *certain* God would never extend the promise meant for them to people like *that*. “It’s funny, isn’t it,” I saw one of our Episcopal bishops quoted as saying recently. “That you can preach a judgmental and vengeful and angry God and nobody will mind. But you start preaching a God that is too accepting, too loving, too forgiving, too merciful, too kind . . . and you are in trouble.” The people Jesus is preaching to in Nazareth “believe that they know all about God, and about the scope and limits of God’s love.”⁸ Their certainty that God belongs to them alone turns into anger and violence and they try to hurl God’s greatest gift to the world off of a cliff.

Our patron, Paul, reminded the Corinthians, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly . . . Now I know only in part.” We live in a society that is very polarized in which competing groups act with absolute certainty about their positions leaving little or no room for the possibility that they might be wrong. We Christians must set a better example by striving to remain faithful through a healthy doubt cultivated by the virtue of humility; else we may end up throwing God off of a cliff in the name of certainty. In the

⁶ Linda McKinnish, *Feasting on the Word (Kindle Edition)*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Year C, Volume 4: Advent through Transfiguration*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), Loc. 9474-9476.

⁷ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2008), Loc. 1958.

⁸ Epperly, 20.

words of the Puritan Oliver Cromwell who fought for religious freedom from the Church of England in the seventeenth century (and who also, incidentally, often failed to take his own advice), “I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken.” Humility, exercises restraint. We must never forget, as this reading about the beginning of Jesus’ ministry foreshadows the way in which that ministry will end, that it was the blind certainty of upstanding religious folk that pushed Jesus to the Cross.

This, incidentally, is one of the reasons we do some of things we do on Wednesday nights. Like talk about issues of race. Like invite Muslims to share their faith, experience, challenges and fears with us as we’ve done recently. We do this because we hold dear the Christian virtue of humility, a desire to know others first hand, and to understand what Jesus might have us learn from them. This is Paul’s vision of love in 1 Corinthians 13. As Christians, we find our unity not primarily in doctrines (important as that can be), but in the relationships we share with the person of Jesus Christ, and with others. “Faith, hope, and love abide, these three,” says Paul, “and the greatest of these is love.” Love. Charity. It’s Christian charity for one another despite our doubts and differences that gathers people together around one table, into the embrace of the God whose arms are wide enough and strong enough to hold more than we can imagine from our limited view. The challenge for us is to realize, with humility, that God’s grace doesn’t just exist for us, but also for those different from us. God speaks words of encouragement to us and to those whom we distrust or dislike: “You may be only a boy, and you may be only a girl,” says God; “You may be only this, or only that, but I made you that way. Trust in me. I have a challenging job for you, and I promise I’ll always have your back.”

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