

“God’s Words in Your Mouth”
Jeremiah 1: 4-10

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August 28th marks the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

When Lawrence Cumberbatch was sixteen years old, he walked from New York City to Washington DC for the March. He shared his story this past week on NPR's Storycorps. He said that when he told his parents his intentions—that he would be walking with a whole group of people and they had everything planned out—they still tried to dissuade him. They thought he was too young, and that it would be too dangerous. Eventually they let him go, and he set off on the road. Lawrence said they walked from sun up to sunset every day. They ate meals out of vending machines, living off of packets of peanut butter crackers. When they reached Delaware, authorities would not let them stop for any reason, so they marched for 30 miles, with a police vehicle in front of them, and one behind them, until they crossed the border and were out of the state. They kept walking, and when they reached the mall in Washington, they were led up to the main podium. When Martin Luther King gave his famous “I Have a Dream Speech,” Lawrence and his friends were standing right behind him.

When we remember the March on Washington, we remember that speech. When Lawrence Cumberbatch remembers that day, he remembers looking out at the sea of faces and thinking that he would never have an opportunity to be a part of something that huge again.

Over 200,000 people participated in the March on Washington on August 28, 1963. You can hear some of them in the background of Dr. King's speech. Over 200,000 people and all of them were answering a call to seek justice and equality. None of them knew the ripple effect that day would have in the coming years. None of them knew that the March on Washington would be viewed as the turning point in American history, or that it would provide the momentum needed to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. No one knew for sure what the outcome would be. But the

thousands and thousands of people who participated trusted that they were where they were supposed to be. They trusted that their action that day would make a difference, not just for their lives, but for the lives of the countless numbers of people who were not able to march, and who needed someone to stand up for them, so that their voices might be heard and their pain might be seen.

We often think of Dr. King when we think of people who answered a call to seek justice and peace. And he clearly did, but the crowds of people that surrounded him and lifted him up were also answering that same call. Maybe they hadn't been trained like Dr. King was, maybe they weren't on stage with the other speakers or they weren't in the limelight. Maybe we don't know all of their names, but they matter just as much, if not more. It takes even the smallest, quietest people to stand up for justice in order for it to be enacted. No one person can do it alone.

When the prophet Jeremiah first heard his own call, he was young, inexperienced, and did not feel prepared. God famously said to him, “Before I shaped you in the womb, I knew all about you. Before you saw the light of day, I had holy plans for you: A prophet to the nations—that’s what I had in mind for you,” and Jeremiah replies “Hold it, God! Look at me. I don’t know anything. I’m only a boy!” There is nothing like someone telling you that you are ready, and that you are expected to do great and difficult things to make you feel small and insecure, no matter whether you are a boy or a man, a girl or a woman, young or old, experienced or a novice. I would say that is especially true when the voice comes from God, and God is sending you out to stand for justice in the midst of an unjust country, and it is God who is commanding that you be the voice of prophesy that will first challenge and then save a kingdom from total destruction.

Jeremiah's call is such a fitting story for a Sunday where we are celebrating the baptisms of three very different people—a young boy who is made of curiosity and lives fully in the present moment: a big brother who is already full of wisdom and deep questions, and a father who demonstrates his love for his family through compassion, humor, and patience. Three different people who are united in their commitment to grow in their faith, to listen to the direction God is calling them

in their lives, and to have taken that first step to answering that call by covenanting not just with God, but with this entire congregation. Without the support of those who have already entered into this covenant and are well on their own journeys, I imagine it would be extremely difficult to fathom living up the promises of baptism. It would be lonely, and frustrating, and even the strongest among us might feel defeated rather quickly.

I think this family has picked a good congregation to help support them on their faith journeys, because all around me I see people who are answering God's call to seek justice and create peace and equality in our world. I see people who have gone overseas to teach and to provide medical aide to those who would otherwise have to do without. I see youth and adults who are so excited about giving a week in service to communities where people may look different than they do or may lead different lives, but where they still find points of connection and ways of developing relationships. I see people who quietly visit homebound friends, people who offer rides to those who need them, people who tutor and glean and people who bike and run to raise awareness for important causes. I see people who give their money away because they know they have plenty and too many in this world don't have enough. In each of these people, and in each of these acts, I hear God's call being answered, by regular, everyday kind of people, just doing their small part to live out their faith.

I'm sure that every one of the people I've named has had their own version of Jeremiah's protest. "But I am just a boy!" Or, "I am not old enough or strong enough or important enough! Or I won't be able to make a difference." Doubt and comparing ourselves to others might be the great equalizer in our world. Doubt can paralyze us and prevent us from doing what we know we are called to do. Our perceived inadequacy becomes an excuse to hold us back. For me, what pushes me beyond that place of self-doubt is the reminder that it is God that formed me from the time I was in the womb. I love that God says, "I know all about you." I believe that God knows and sees more than we can understand, and that is a lot greater than any amount of doubt we can create for ourselves.

The nudge to follow our call to work for justice is an ongoing challenge. It is a lifelong process.

It's isn't a one time shot to get it right, and it doesn't cease when you make gains. The call feels different to different people. In some it might be a knot in the pit of their stomach that no medicine can cure, only action will make dissipate. Some might feel the call when they experience righteous anger or sadness in the face of oppression. Some might feel the call in a series of nudges over several years, pointing them in a new direction. Some are bowled over by their call, and dedicate every second of their life to it—for others it might be more in balance with other aspects of their life. But it is present, and it is tended to. There was a quote in today's UCC Daily Devotional from Howard Thurman. When asked how he knew he'd been called to be a minister of the Gospel he said, "I learned to follow the grain in my own wood."

For some that call to seek justice might have to do with children, others with immigration, others with race or gender or gender identity, some it might be economic justice or healthcare justice. It might be education or animals or the environment or domestic violence. The call comes to us in different ways and when it comes, it takes different forms. The world needs all of us to respond. Just as it took a whole crowd cheering on Dr. King so that his message could really be heard and taken seriously, it takes each of us listening for the ways God is nudging us to action, challenging us to work for the justice and peace our world so desperately needs.

One of my very favorite people from the Civil Rights Movement is Bayard Rustin. He was an activist and a pacifist. He was one of the key figures who helped lift Dr. King to the national spotlight, and he was the chief organizer of the March on Washington. Because he was openly gay, many people saw him as a liability in the 1960s, and he was forced to remain working in the shadows of the Civil Rights Movement, but he kept at it, and we might not be as far as we are today without his tireless work. You may have heard his name recently because it was just this month that President Obama posthumously awarded Rustin with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. It's a symbolic way of finally giving him the recognition he more than earned.

Because Rustin worked so often in the background, setting up and organizing other people,

there are not very many quotes that are attributed to him. But there is one that he is known for, and it is one that I love. Bayard Rustin once said, “We need in every bay and community a group of angelic troublemakers.” We are called to be a part of that group of angelic troublemakers here in our own community. We are called to stand up when we see injustice, and we are called to be a voice to bring peace and reconciliation into this world. There is no one person that is needed more than the rest. It takes us all to live into that dream of freedom and equality.