

Called, a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor based Jeremiah 1: 4-10

How does God in heaven get word, instruction to we mere mortals down upon the earth? How is it that the veil between heaven and earth (between God and us) is pierced, breached, penetrated so to enable God to *message* mortals? Or, let's put it even more simply: how do we receive instruction from God? What's the vehicle or forum by which we earthly mortals are commissioned by God and deployed to carry out God's will, to bring God's will to fruition and make it so, on earth as it is in heaven?

This is a thorny matter, a contested matter. Some among us hear otherworldly voices when there's nothing there. Others among us are all but deaf to God's thundering proclamations.

How do we mere mortals hear and receive authentic instruction from God on high? How do we know it to be authentic?

Our bible has an answer to this. It's called: **Standing in the council of God**

In the Bible **standing in the council of God** looks like a Divine Throne Room. ...Filling the room, from bottom to top, from front to back, from side to side: the heavenly host... angels, God's angels, an army of them, a multitude of them which no one can number. At the far end of the divine throne room, high and lifted up: the divine throne. Seated upon the throne: God in God's awesome self, too blinding and brilliant even to look at.

It is here, says our Bible, that God and God's heavenly host conduct business. Can you see it? The divine throne room thronged with shimmering angels. And at the far end, the blinding brilliance of God conducting the meeting. Biblically speaking, this meeting is called "the divine council" (Ps 82:1, 89:5-7).

In the Bible, now and again, particularly in a time of crisis, God reaches down from heaven, reaches down from the throne and, by the scruff of the neck, grasps hold of some, poor, unlikely, unsuspecting person – some Joe Blow, minding his own business – some Jeremiah or Jonah, some Martin or Harriet, some Frederick or Phillis – some person with no pretensions to spiritual leadership -- and God whirls that person up and plops him down into the divine throne room. That is "**standing in the council of God**"

And there and then, before God and before the entire host of heaven, God in awesome splendor, instructs and commissions that puny mortal ...and in that commissioning the puny, mere mortal ...–this one now standing in the council of God -- becomes a prophet, is made a prophet, is transformed into God's own messenger. Most times, the mortal protests, and kicking and screaming and objecting that he or she is not up to the job... is not good enough. Jeremiah protests he's not old enough; he's only a boy. But, in each case, God assures the mortal one that God will be with them ...that it is not their adequacy that will make the difference, but God's support and presence.

But, how do we, we back here on earth... how do we distinguish the prophet who **stands in the council of God**, from the charlatan, the pretender. And there will always be pretenders. Here's

one way: in the book of Jeremiah it is claimed that prophets whose prophesies present no challenge to the conscience of the nation stand in no relationship to God and have no access to God's word. (Jer. 23.9-40) To put it differently, if the prophet challenges the conscience of a nation, you can bet that the prophet is **standing in the council of God**.

We know Jeremiah to have been a true prophet of God. His pronouncements challenged the conscience of the nation:

Jeremiah denounced the king for lording it over his subjects while they suffered in misery and despair.

Jeremiah denounced the clergy for being so heavenly minded they were of no earthly good.

He denounced extramarital shindigs and jamborees... which, apparently were quite the thing in Jerusalem 600 years before the Common Era.

Jeremiah complained that the Jerusalemites were so obsessed with circumcision, that they should "try circumcising the foreskins of their hearts".

Jeremiah denounced the rich for exploiting the poor.

He denounced the people for all forms of idolatry: for making the nation an idol, and the Temple an idol, and the King an idol...that is, for putting their trust in, and worshipping everything *but* God.

Jeremiah was a true prophet of God. His pronouncements challenged the conscience of the nation. In fact, so challenging and so very unwelcome were they, that for his troubles, Jeremiah suffered imprisonment, was nearly buried alive, was beaten up, and, if tradition is correct, he was in the end stoned to death.

Which is to say, Jeremiah stood in a hard and holy place, a fearsome and lonely place. He challenged the conscience of a nation. He **stood in the council of God**.

Throughout February, the clergy here will be preaching on the biblical call narratives. The biblical call narratives are a particular biblical genre, and each call narrative (Moses's, Gideon's, Samuel's, Isaiah's, Jeremiah's, Ezekiel's, Amos', Jonah's) each follow a formulaic pattern:

1. Crisis. Something down on the earth that has gone so wrong, so awry that God will need a human messenger to intervene.
2. Confrontation. God espies some likely person, rests a God-sized hand on the person's shoulder and says, "You're it. You're the one. I need you. I need you to tell the king he's got no clothes. Or, I need you to tell ol' Pharaoh, to free all his free labor".

That's called: **standing in the council of God**.

3. Objection. Jeremiah complains: don't look at me. I'm not telling the king that. I'm just a boy. Find someone else.

4. Assurance. Sweet assurance. God's formulaic response to each person called into leadership, for each stammering protestation, God whispers: "Ssh, I will be with you."

5. Sign. In the case of Jeremiah, the sign is clear as clear can be. Jeremiah reports: "God put forth God's hand and touched my mouth, and put words into my mouth". Now, that's a sign.

What is being claimed in these formulaic call narratives is that our God is active in the world... that our God observes the unfolding of historical events and is not averse to intervening, especially in times of crises. What is also being claimed is that God uses humans, mere mortals (we who are, in every way inadequate) to get things done here on earth (human inadequacy is overcome by God's presence)...and, not least, God employs humans to give voice to the interests of heaven.

How does God in heaven get word, instruction to we mere mortals down upon the earth? And, how do we distinguish the true prophet from the pretender? Now you know!

As we near our 350th anniversary, I propose that the founders of this church – the twenty-eight men and their wives, who founded this church in 1669 (among them: a butcher, a bricklayer, a brewer, a bookseller, a shoemaker, two ship's captains, a tailor, two felt-makers, an apothecary, a mint-master, and a schoolmaster) that these 28 men and their spouses, were **standing in the council of God**, when they challenged the conscience of the Colony over the question of Christian baptism.

Compare that historical moment, that prophetic commissioning, to the formulaic pattern of the biblical call narratives:

1. Crisis. First there appears a presenting crisis. Something down on the earth that has gone so wrong, so awry that God will need a human messenger to intervene. In 1669 it was a crisis over baptism: who could and who couldn't be baptized. It was a political and theological crisis as confounding on this soil in 1669 as is the question today about voter rights: who is in and who is out; who has voice and who does not; who has access to grace and power, and who is excluded?

2. Confrontation. God spies some likely personages – in our case, some 28-men and their wives -- rests a God-sized hand on their collective shoulder and says, "You're it. You're the ones. I need you. I need you to challenge the conscience of the Colony. I need you to challenge the clergy who are acting too heavenly minded to be of any earthly good." With that calling our founding forebears found themselves **standing In the Council of God**.

Which is to say, they stood in a hard and holy place, a fearsome and lonely place. For their stand, they were branded heretics, schematics... troublemakers. They were reviled and all but driven out of town.

3. Objection. Like Jeremiah, our founding forbears wanted, desperately wanted to shirk this unwelcome call by God. Don't look at us. Find someone else.
4. Assurance. Sweet assurance. God's formulaic response to each person called into leadership: "I will be with you." It is the first thing our founding forebears give witness to when on May 12, 1669, they draw up their founding covenant: "We, whose names are underwritten, being called by God...do trust only in God's grace and help..."

That's called **Standing in the Council of God**.

5. Sign. In the case of our forebears the sign that served as blessing and assured our forebears of God's favor and intervention: Mary Norton. In an act exhibiting both generosity and Christian courage, Mary Norton, widow, threw in her lot with those branded heretics, schismatics and troulbers...and found herself, Old Widow Norton, "**standing in the council of God**"

It is no coincidence that this church annually elects people to serve on our Church Council. No coincidence that we call a council. It is no coincident that our Council gathers every month. It is no coincidence that before getting down to business – God's business, the church's business – Council begins with prayer, invokes the power and presence of the Living God...invokes the power and presence of the hosts of heaven...asks that the veil between heaven and earth might be pierced, breached, penetrated...asks and prays that the will of God enthroned in heaven might find its way into our puny, mere mortal hearts and minds, into our mortal speaking and doing...asks and prays that we might be vehicles by which the conscience of this city and nation might be challenged... prays that God's will may be done on earth as it is in heaven.

What I am proudest about of this church: is that the leaders do their utmost, endeavor with all that they have and all that they are: **to standing in the Council of God**.

If you could hear the thoughtful deliberations, the searching of conscience, the asking of hard questions, the attentiveness to what will make glad the heart of God...

I propose that the leaders and people of this church were standing in the council of God the day you voted to sell an old book and transform it into ministry.

The day our leaders voted to provide sanctuary

The day they shadow-boxed the city and developers, fighting for affordable housing

The day they opened Boston Warm, providing both companionship and shelter to the unhoused.

You ask me: that's challenging the conscience of a city and its standing in the Council of God

I put it to you, to each of you: to hold yourself, and hold your leaders to this measureable test of our authenticity as God's servants and messengers:

Are we challenging the conscience of the church, and of the city, and of the nation?

Are the clergy too heavenly minded to be of any earthly good?

Finally: Would Jeremiah and Jonah, Martin and Harriet, Frederick and Phillis find themselves cheering us on from their seats in the divine throne room? Would they say of us: Old South Church in Boston: **"They are standing in the Council of God!"**?