

## **Call and Response**

Rev. John Allen

Today, we as a congregation will gather after worship for our annual meeting. We will discern together whether to authorize a \$400,000 capital campaign to create a youth center in the lower level of the Centre School building.

It has been over 17 years since the last time this church held such a vote. A generation of children have been raised, and gone out into the world.

At that time the project was much larger, and much riskier. The vote then as to liquidate the church's \$2 million dollar endowment, as well as launch a large capital campaign in order to build the Centre School building that now houses our Sunday School classrooms.

Preparing for this morning, I went back into our historical archives, carefully maintained and organized by our own Jamie Roth, and

found a copy of the sermon my predecessor Jeff Johnson preached on the morning of that vote.

The sermon is titled “Breaking the Sound Barrier” and I was tempted to offer it to you verbatim in lieu of my own preaching this morning, because it has aged well.

Let me just offer a sample:

These are Jeff’s words:

“I was reminded recently of the struggles that early test pilots had in breaking the sound barrier. As they approached the necessary speed, the plane would shake and shudder. And so the pilots did the logical things, they backed off the speed, and in most cases crashed. That was until one pilot decided that when the plane began to shake, he would accelerate, rather than back off. He was the first to burst through, and the shaking stopped. Imagine the courage it took for him to do that, no knowing what would happen.”

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Today's scripture reading comes for the very beginning of the prophecy of Jeremiah.

Most prophets begin these texts with a story of how it is they came to be a prophet, the story of God's call, and their response.

This is Jeremiah's story.

He was a young boy, when he heard the voice of God saying "I have appointed you, as a prophet to the nations."

"More than that. I made this plan before you were born. While you were in your mother's womb."

Jeremiah was shaken, and he backed off.

“Not me. I am just a child. I do not know how to speak for you, to your people.”

God’s response, “Do not say I am only a child. I have appointed you, to pluck up and pull down, to build and to plant.”

And the rest, as they say, is history. After all, there wouldn’t be a book of Jeremiah if the story ended there.

Despite the fact that he could think of 1,000 reasons why he couldn’t be a prophet, he found he only needed one reason to be a prophet.

God’s call.

I have never heard God’s voice the way Jeremiah describes. Fully formed sentences arising in his heart like a spring. I don’t doubt that God has tried, but I usually don’t get the message that way. My mind is more often than not frantic and cluttered. Perhaps I have missed a few calls.

But my experience has shown me that God has more than one way to speak.

Throughout my life I have experienced God's call more through familiar pathways closing as new ones open, or little tugs or nudges.

We have come to the vote we are taking today after more than three years of these kinds of tugs and nudges. Members of this church, myself included, have felt an invitation from the Holy Spirit to explore the idea of building a youth center in our basement.

Those nudges have come, most importantly to me, through the words and experiences of our own Youth. I still remember sitting in a meeting a year and a half ago about Mental Health and Substance Abuse challenges faced by Youth in our community. Milton High School had sent 4 teenagers to be a part of the panel discussion. I was a proud pastor to see that 2 of them were part of our church. Arielle Solomon and Alyssa Foster.

They both spoke with a great deal of urgency and concern for their friends, who suffer from depression and anxiety at startling rates, who self-medicate with increasingly dangerous substances, and who, despite the hyper-connection of social media, feel quite profoundly alone.

I remember that someone asked them what had helped them survive the challenges of this age, and it was Arielle who leaned over, took the microphone and said: “honestly: my church.”

She told the room that this place was a place where she had found belonging, community, and a place where she could be herself without fear of judgement.

Ok that one was more than a nudge. Sometimes the Holy Spirit grabs a bullhorn.

I thought of Arielle and Alyssa and that night when I read this story of Jeremiah's call. How easy would it have been for a bunch of important adults to decided we didn't need to hear from a couple of high schoolers.

How easy would it have been for the two of them to conclude that no one would listen to them.

That's my testimony, and this vision that the Youth Center Team has presented to the congregation of a facility where we can dramatically expand the number of students who have an experience like Arielle's, of a place where they are welcome just as they are, this vision reflects the best approximation of where the leaders of this church, including me, believe we are being called.

But, at the risk of drastically oversimplifying history, in 1638 a bunch of English people got on a boat and ended up on this little bit of Massachusetts tribal land, because they were tired of ministers like me deciding what God did and didn't want on our own.

In great part, the reason the puritans settled New England was to create communities where they could gather together, guided by their own conscience, and own connection to God, to discern for themselves where the Spirit was leading.

They believed that we are always smarter together than any one of us is alone.

That is the meeting we are having today.

We, as a congregation, are being asked to answer a question: “is building this youth space where God is leading us next?”

And the more of us who prayerfully consider that question, the more likely we are to hear.

“Is building this youth space where God is leading us next?”



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A little more from Jeff's sermon before that last meeting:

“How tempting it would be to want some magical assurances, some guarantees, but ultimately there are none. So this is really an exercise in faith— which is what makes it so exciting. IF the vote is positive, we will be opening a huge door to our future. But as we approach the sound barrier, you might feel a tremble or two, i know I do, I believe now is the time to accelerate, and burst through into... well, we don't really know, do we?”

He could not have known how prescient those words would be when he delivered them from this pulpit on September 9, 2001.

Two days later, when the towers fell, and the pentagon burned, every vision and dream about the future felt like it had been coated with the same ash as covered the streets of lower manhattan. And that endowment we planned to fund our future plummeted in value.

When you walk back to coffee hour today, you will be walking into what this church built in that moment. We spent money we had, and plenty that we didn't have to make good on the vision. And the future of this church, that you and I inhabit today, opened.

The bottom floor of that building was left unfinished. Here's our chance.

I am not expecting any great cataclysm, I pray that the road ahead is smoother for us now than it was then.

But there are no guarantees in any of this.

There is careful preparation, detailed budgets, feasibility studies, good conversations with the town, there are people who are ready to make generous gifts to make this vision a reality. That is what we know.

There is so much we do not know, and cannot know.

Which is what makes the question we ask ourselves today so important.

“Is building this youth space where God is leading us next?”

If it is not, then this is likely not worth doing.

But if it is, well this is the great joy of being people of faith. If we find our way to follow where God is leading, then we can take bold and confident thoughtful steps in a positive direction without needing to know everything the future will hold.

I like very much that the passage from Jeremiah we read this morning ends is just the very beginning of the story.

That feels appropriate. The rest of the book is there. We aren't reading it yet.

But let me tell you, I think the best is yet to come.