

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC  
Danvers, MA  
Rev. Kevin M Smith  
January 28, 2018  
Jeremiah 1:4-19

*Gracious Leading*

Remember that old country western song, *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*? It goes like this:

*I beg your pardon,  
I never promised you a rose garden.  
Along with the sunshine,  
There's gotta be a little rain sometimes.  
When you take, you gotta give, so live and let live,  
Or let go.  
I beg your pardon,  
I never promised you a rose garden. (from [www.cowboylyrics.com](http://www.cowboylyrics.com))*

Essentially, I think this is exactly what God is telling the prophet Jeremiah in our story this morning from the Hebrew Scriptures. Just look at many of the major figures of the Bible—Adam and Eve, Abraham, Moses, all the prophets, and certainly Jesus and all the disciples. God did not promise any of them that their lives, if they practiced their faith faithfully, so to speak, would be a rose garden or would be easy.

Jeremiah doubted his ability to express wisdom when he knew himself that he was an inexperienced prophet. Moses had a stutter or something because he complained to God about his lack of ability to lead the Israelites; at first, Saul didn't even recognize God's voice when he was being called—and when he did he doubted it was God. And then there was Adam and Eve who couldn't even obey simple little instructions like "don't eat from that tree." When Jesus was asked by his mother in Cana to do something about the lack of wine at the wedding he protested and basically said, "Mom, I'm just not ready yet!" And the disciples had a very hard time believing that anybody was as good as them, like the taxpayers and lepers that Jesus hung around with in spite of their protests. We human beings all seem to have inferiority complexes when we are challenged to change or we have superiority complexes thinking we don't need to change and answer the call to rise above our limited views of the world to do something that God is calling us to do.

What if Jonas Salk or Thomas Edison had not embarked on the hard work and research they did to bring forth a vaccine for polio or this thing called a light bulb that would provide illumination to our homes and streets? Sure, I'm guessing that people like Salk, or Edison, or Einstein or Steve Jobs probably broke out in a cold sweat some nights wondering what the heck they were doing. Even though they were all blessed with great intellects, you can bet that there were parts of their personalities where moving forward with the immensity of their workloads seemed to overwhelm them. What if Jesus had stomped his foot down and told his mother to forget it? Or what if Simon Peter and

John and James had decided to just go on with their fishing thinking this Jesus of lowly Nazareth was plum out of his mind or was asking them, lowly fisherman, to change the world? Where would be in this world if people who are called to change it don't answer the bell?

Where would you be if you decided not to get that education you felt called to do? Where would you be if you didn't say "I do" at the altar and instead got cold feet and headed for the nearest door? Where would that beautiful family of yours be if, even though you had no idea how your marriage would turn out, you had made another choice? What would your life be like if you didn't decide at some time to walk through the doors of Maple Street Church? Life is full of large and small, simple and complex choices and no matter what age we are or what skills and abilities we are blessed with there will always be tough choices to make and challenges to face, especially when that little voice inside you is calling you to do something you thought you would never do or never could do or never wanted to do.

I could never have imagined 40 years ago or 30 years ago or even 20 years ago that I would be going to divinity school at Harvard. Look folks, I graduated from a little podunk high school in the middle of a converted wheat farm in a school of 150 students. Most of my classmates got married right out of high school and went to work on their mom and dad's farm. Sure, I had dreams. We all have dreams. But you know that feeling you get sometimes when you embark on some course of action and just before you fall asleep at night, or when you wake up in the middle of night there is this real feeling of panic and terror and you say to yourself, "what am I doing?" Or, "how could I have committed to this?"

Bruce Epperly, a wonderful process theologian, has written that "the lure forward is always greater than our perception of our gifts. But, the God who gives us a dream is always present as our companion to bring God's vision to fullness."<sup>1</sup>

You see, I don't think that for most of us God talks out loud or writes instructions in the clouds. For those of you who have heard God's message to you in this way I say Hallelujah! But for me and for others who have rarely, if ever, received clear messages from God about what we should do, we must muddle through with life facing unclear and garbled and sometimes really challenging lures from God that are sometimes nagging, sometimes totally against how we would normally behave, and sometimes just downright beyond what we think are our mental, physical, and emotionally capacities to be. God plants a lure to action in our minds and hearts in an attempt to move us toward our callings. I also think that God sometimes puts roadblocks in our paths to stop us from making bad choices and going where we should not go.

If you look back on your life, and really think about the little, and sometimes big, choices you made you can probably understand better how you got to where you were today. I tend to think, and maybe I'm just naïve or just being a Pollyanna, but I tend to think that all the choices I made in my life that resulted in good things for other people and for me are because God was planting little lures in my heart and mind to lead me. Now, sometimes these choices resulted in some momentary suffering in my life, or in the life of others, but through cascading of moments and decisions to follow God's calls the tough experiences taught me something or resulted in moving me towards the greater

good and light. I think this is one of the most important facets of my faith that I believe with all my heart that God loves me and will not lure me towards something that is wrong. God's grace will lead me to the right place. This doesn't mean that I won't have thoughts about thinking I'm crazy to try something or perhaps thoughts that I should just let go or not do something or take a different route. Most of my life has worked this way and I credit God fully for molding me in the way I am and what I'm doing. But, faith in the ultimate goodness and love of God is pretty basic and essential to having this attitude. Faith, I think, is less about interpretations of Bible scriptures, and assigned beliefs, and is more about trusting in a God that wants the best for you even if you will never live on the velvet highway that leads to a rose garden. Living the life God is calling you to takes faith. And you know, maybe, just maybe, we will live in a rose garden eventually—but don't forget about those thorns! Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Epperly, Bruce."Lectionary Commentary" at <http://www.processandfaith.org/lectionary/YearC/2009-2010/2010-01-31.shtm>