



Harold “Skip” Masback, III
“Where Shall We Work?”
Focal Scripture: Psalm 139:13-18, Jeremiah 1:4-8

Psalm 139:13-18

*13 For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.
14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.
15 My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
16 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.
17 How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
18 I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
I come to the end—I am still with you.*

Jeremiah 1:4-8

*4 Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,
5 “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”
6 Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.”
7 But the LORD said to me,
“Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’;
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you.
8 Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,
says the LORD.”*

The young baker will rise in the pre-dawn dark of old Carcassonne to help his parents prepare the dough. Does he pass his last few moments of sleep dreaming of being an aristocrat or an explorer or a poet? It matters little. His father is the village baker, as was his father and his father before him.

You and I know there is both nobility and satisfaction in the boy's dutifulness. If he ignores his heart's desires, he does so for the family and village that depend on him. But we still chafe at the idea of his sacrifice, for we moderns are committed to the unfettered pursuit of happiness – we prize our freedom to choose our own path, to make our own destiny. We root for the “Coal Miner's Daughter” to get free of housework so she can realize her gifts as a country music star, for the Indian girl to slip away from her immigrant family so she can “Bend it Like Beckham” on local soccer fields, for Jack Donaghy to sail off to find true happiness in the last episode of “30 Rock.”

We all know something of the young baker's constraints, for each of us has passed through years when our choices were limited by our responsibilities. We have been students yearning to travel at will, young parents wondering when the baby will finally sleep through the night, employees too saddled with debt to change jobs. Like the baker, we rightly take our satisfaction from the nobility of responsibilities discharged well.

But many of us have also tasted the freedom to choose our own paths. Beyond the imaginings of our forebears, we are the generation most free to chart our own course.

But this freedom delivers us up to a challenge the young baker never knows. While the baker sleeps a contented sleep, we toss and turn with burdens he'll never shoulder. Our freedom to choose brings the challenge of choosing well. Just what **is** our destiny and just **how** do we chart our own course? Our increased prosperity brings an increased challenge to achieve not just survival but also meaning, fulfillment, and significance. How in the world do we do that?

We may be the first generation to envision such a wide horizon of choices, but we remain constrained by finite lives and finite wisdom. We can imagine stepping off in any of 360 directions, but we must choose just one and set about our work. So, just how do we choose? Where shall we work?

And now we find ourselves almost envying the baker, for we feel the anxious weight of choice. Believe it or not, career counselors and psychologists even have a name for this anxiety, they call it zeteophobia: the fear of career planning based on unrealistic expectations to predict and control future events. I am not making this up.

A principal marker of zeteophobia is procrastination, and we've all seen it: the young graduates spending yet another year waiting tables in Jackson Hole because they can't quite figure out what to do with their lives; the executives frozen in jobs they despise because they can't quite decide on the perfect new career; the empty nesters and retirees bogged down in a dozen temporizing projects because they can't quite settle on the one galvanizing challenge worth committing to. How **do** we choose our path? Where **shall** we work?

How you approach these issues will largely turn on how you answer a simple question: are you seeking a career or are you responding to a vocation? In modern parlance “career” and “vocation” are often confused, but correctly understood they mark out two radically different strategies for deciding where we shall work. Looking back, I can see that I chose my path into practicing law by “seeking a career,” but I found my way along my path to ministry by “responding to a vocation.”

The dictionary defines “career” “as a chosen pursuit; a profession or occupation. The general course of one’s working life or one’s profession.” “Career”, like it’s sister word, “careen” traces back to the old French word "carrier," meaning "racecourse" and both words carry connotations of an onrushing race horse given its head.

We all know what that’s like. We say we choose careers - we build careers. We sit down with our yellow pads and calculate opportunities, costs, and payoffs. We chart our courses along the path best suited to polish our resumes and mold us for success, and then, like horses given their head, we careen down the racecourse of our career, straining for the prize.

This pretty well describes my path to and through the practice of law. As I went through college, I labored to calculate the optimal match between my marketable skills and the world’s opportunities. After graduation, I leapt out of the starting gate into the law school paper chase and then the practice at a firm, leaning into the turns to hit my stride, straining to win the partnership prize.

The essence of “career” is trust in the self – trust in self-direction and self-improvement. We assume we possess the ability to choose our course wisely and to shape our lives accordingly. If God exists, God’s only role is to sit in the stands cheering us on, to join us in the winner’s circle to crown our triumph, or to pick us up after we stumble and tend our wounds. Where shall we work? We shall work where we choose – with or without zeteophobia.

The concept of vocation is radically different - virtually a mirror image of “career.” The dictionary defines “vocation” as “a regular occupation, especially one for which a person is particularly suited or qualified. An inclination, as if in response to a summons, to undertake a certain kind of work.” Vocation traces it’s roots back to the old French, “vocation” and to the older Latin, “vocare,” which mean “a calling” or “to call”.

We do not choose a vocation, rather, we are chosen for our vocation. We are not alone in our vocation, rather the very notion of “calling” presupposes a caller whose call we answer. We do not make ourselves over for our vocation, rather we have been made for our vocation by the very caller who summons us.

This pretty well describes how I experienced the path to seminary and ministry. The courses and readings at seminary didn’t feel like burdensome requirements; they felt like amazing opportunities. I didn’t go into youth ministry as a dull but necessary prerequisite to professional advancement. I couldn’t believe my good luck that I could get paid for doing something I loved to do.

The essence of vocation is trust in the caller. People of faith trust in a God who plans all the work necessary to bless creation, who raises up children well matched to the necessary tasks, who chooses and calls his children into their vocations, and who then blesses and sustains them in their work. Where shall we work? We shall work where we **are called**.

So Jeremiah hears God's assurance of blessing to Israel, "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm." [Jeremiah 29:11.] And God tells Jeremiah he has been preparing him for his particular calling since before God formed him in the womb. [Jeremiah 1:5.] God then calls Jeremiah into his preordained vocation as a prophet, and assures him of divine favor and guidance: "Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you." [Jeremiah 1:8.]

Now, perhaps about now you're ready with an objection. Look, Mr. Preacher Man, I'm ready to respond. Let God call me from out of a burning bush, and I'll work where called. Let God's voice float down on me from on high, and I'll go where directed. Let Jesus show up next to my boat and I'll follow where led. But, ah, I keep checking my I Phone and I haven't gotten so much as a voice mail. How am I to respond to a calling I've never heard, an order I've never received, a sign I've never seen?

The answer my friends, is nearer than you think. For thousands of years the rabbi's have been telling a charming story of vocation. According to the rabbis, before you were born, God sat down with your soul for a little chat. God surveyed all the roles and callings in life and asked what you most wanted to do on earth. As soon as you and God agreed on your role, God went to work knitting into you all the gifts and graces you would need for your callings, coding your heart with your deepest hopes and aspirations. When God was done, he turned you over to an angel to escort you down to earth. The angel led you into creation, but just before she let you go, she pressed her finger up against your upper lip, erasing all memory of the agreement you had reached with God.

Your mission on earth is simple: to rediscover the understanding you had reached with God, to discern the callings for which you had been created. Do you doubt the story? Then check to see if there isn't still an indentation on your upper lip where the angel pressed her finger – and see if you don't put your hand against your heart when speaking of your deepest hopes and aspirations.

How will you discern the callings for which you have been created? By listening. As the Quakers put it, we learn our true callings by "listening to our life." Parker Palmer put it this way, "Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am." [Parker Palmer, Listening to Your Life at 4.]

Since it was God who "formed [our] inward parts; and knit [us] together in our mother's wombs" [Psalm 139:13.] discerning how God put us together, discerning how our unique gifts and talents, and our unique strengths and weaknesses, and our unique joys and aversions hang together, will point us toward our divine purpose.

I once asked our greatest local artist, Walter Dubois Richards how a parent could tell if a child were cut out to be an artist. "Well," Walter said, "if no matter what you do you can't stop them from drawing all the time, then maybe they're meant to be an artist."

Ultimately, we are called simply to become what we have been created by God to be. As Old Rabbi Zusya taught his students, "In the coming world, they will not ask me "Why were you not Moses?" They will ask me, "Why were you not Zusya."

Perhaps Frederick Buechner said it best of all:

"The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you most need to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you've presumably met requirement (a), but if your work is writing cigarette ads, the chances are you've missed requirement (b). On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you have probably met requirement (b) but if most of the time you're bored and depressed by it, the chances are you have not only bypassed (a) but probably aren't helping your patients much either.

Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. [Wishful Thinking at p. 118-119.]

That's where we should work, beloved. Right there. Should we have the choice, we should work right there where our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. May God bless to us the understanding to discern his call and the courage to follow. **Amen.**