

Answer the Call

Sermon for Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 6, 2022

Readings: Isaiah 6:1-8; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11; Psalm 138

Sermon text: Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Our readings this morning show different persons responding to the call of God in differing ways: Isaiah ben Amoz, called to be a prophet to Israel and a light to the gentiles; Paul formerly known as Saul, called to be an apostle; and Peter formerly known as Simon, called to be a disciple. Isaiah is overwhelmed in the presence of God, the Holy and Almighty One; he feels completely unworthy. Yet, when touched by the seraph, he boldly stands up and says, "Here I am, send me." Paul, when he was still Saul, was a zealous Pharisee determined to stamp out this new messianic heresy around Jesus of Nazareth. But when confronted on the road to Damascus with the blinding presence of the Risen Lord, Paul is converted and becomes the most energetic and effective of all the church-planting apostles (though, as he humble-brags, "it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me"). Simon, a humble fisherman, is overwhelmed at the uncanny and awesome power of Jesus to summon fish where there were none, and begs to be allowed to leave. But Jesus makes him an offer he can't refuse: follow me and become a fisher of people! and Simon soon to be called Peter—the rock—leaves everything and follows Jesus. He becomes the leading disciple and one of the main pillars of the new church of Christ.

There is a turning point in each of these stories, a conversion of life, a new call, and a sending out to do the work God has given each of them to do.

Which of course raises the question: what is the work God calls you and me to do, each of us individually, all of us together as a church? What is my role, my vocation in the plan and providence of God?

Unless you go home and experience the transcendent power of God focused on you like a blinding light from heaven (or have a fishing trip with Jesus in your calendar), then perhaps you will have to think this through in light of more mundane experiences and thoughts.

Perhaps you will think to yourself, I don't seem to have any special call or vocation. Perhaps you will ask yourself, like David Byrne, how did I get here, and what am I doing here?—and feel somewhat at sea in life. Perhaps you think you do not have faith or love or courage enough to be special. Perhaps you are by nature skeptical or life's hard knocks have made you cynical. Perhaps you feel unworthy of a high calling. The lyrics of the great African-American Spiritual "There is a balm in Gilead" come to mind:

Sometimes I feel discouraged and think my work's in vain, but then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again... If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul, you can tell the love of Jesus and say, "He died for all."

No matter what else, you can tell the love of Jesus, and try to live with the conscious intention of being his disciple. That's the call we proclaim: to follow Jesus and show him to the world through our love. To receive and hold firm to the good news, as Paul told the folks in Corinth, and then live as a light to the world, as Isaiah did.

Let me say a few words about this three step process, which the theologian Karl Barth called the pattern of Christian life: **called, gathered, sent.**

The call of God is just that, God's call, not ours. You may have a sense of vocation or calling—to be a teacher as Mary did from an early age for instance. But God's call may or may not be the same, it may use your worldly vocation or God may call you from it—as Jesus did Simon, and me for that matter. I believe that what distinguishes God's call is the sense of the holy, a sense that this is more than just the world and you. It may come in a transcendent moment—a glimpse of the infinite, a dissolving of this world—as with the physicist Alan Lightman or the novelist Barbara Ehrenreich, yet still not be connected to a specific Christian or other religious belief. It is just that sense of otherness, of more, mystery, awe, the uncanny. It may indeed come in moments of suffering, or of beauty. What matters next, it seems to me, is how one makes sense of one's encounter with the numinous. Do you have a vocabulary to name it, a religion in which it makes sense? It may take time to figure all this out. And it may be helpful to prepare for the encounter as well. Both of these parts—preparation and reflection—are within at least partial control. We can practice prayer and meditation, prepare through study and reading of others' encounters. And we can reflect alone or with others.

I recommend with others. This is the second step, gathering. Jesus did not just call Simon, he called 11 others—indeed many others, including Mary Magdalene and Paul. And they did not each go their own independent study, as it were. They gathered together, they were a band of disciples. They learned at Jesus' feet. Trained and instructed by him through teachings and parables and practices, they were then sent out to proclaim the good news, to practice healing and teaching. They were made ready for when Jesus ascended and sent the Holy Spirit to take his place as guide. They continued to learn and grow—the apostles appointed deacons and overseers, bishops to take up the proclamation. They themselves split up and went to different parts of the world. The church was launched.

And it was launched to be just what Isaiah and Israel were to be, a light to the gentiles. A light to the world. To be a sign and seed of a new way of being human in community, back in harmony with God, each other and the earth.

Did they get it right? In some ways, not in others. Humans are human and it is often two steps forward one step back. Old cultural patterns like patriarchy and slavery persisted. Others like tribalism were lessened, but threatened to reemerge as Christian

imperialism. We are heirs of a long tradition, a tradition that in America found ways to rationalize slavery and land grabbing, but also was the source of the ideals of equal dignity and individual rights, of the moral law. Abolitionism was an evangelical movement, all sorts of workers right struggles and so on. The work to make the world a better place continues, the work of building the beloved community. we are called and sent to carry on the civil rights struggle of Black Americans whose history we celebrate this month.

Next Sunday, February 13, is the feast day for one of the great Christians in American history, Absalom Jones, the first Black Episcopal priest, ordained in 1802. I will talk more about him then. For you don't have to travel to the Near East or back in time to find Isaiahs, Pauls and Simons. They are forebears, neighbors, fellow Americans; they might be you.

We are all called, gathered and sent to carry on the work of proclamation, healing and striving for justice and peace. It's right there in the baptismal covenant, the summary of what it means to live as a disciple of Jesus, called to be part of the Jesus movement.

Answer the Call.

In the name of Christ, amen.

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