

"God Calling"
Isaiah 43:1-7; Matthew 3:13-17
The Rev. Dr. Kenneth W. Gottman
January 12, 2020

In a 1994 "B.C." cartoon by Johnny Hart, it is bedtime in the anthill. Father ant is reading to his son.

Dad: Once upon a time . . .

Son: We've read that one.

Dad: Twice upon a time . . . (Dad reads the story.) And they live happily ever after.

Son: (Sigh)

Dad: Now, how about your prayers?

Son: Oops. Almost forgot. Do all little ants say their prayers every night?

Dad: Supposed to.

Son: How can God hear so many prayers all at once?

Dad: Hmm . . . Prayer waiting.

Son: Oh, yeah, right.

Early last spring, having just gotten off "call waiting" after being put on hold for a marathon 30 minutes (thank goodness for hands-free speaker phones), I had to wonder about the

backlog of calls at the divine switchboard. Can we be assured of getting through to God? Does God have "call waiting?"

Does God have calls screened? Are some calls taken, some not? Are some calls returned, some not? Is there automatic "call forwarding" to the complaint department? Is there a bonus discount for frequent callers? Are some calls delegated to our guardian angels? Is anybody there on the other end, or are we talking to some automated system or only to ourselves when we pray? Many of us have a sense of being disconnected, or at the very least of having a bad connection. When that happens, do we hang up and try again later?

George Burns, playing God in the movie, "O God," says to John Denver: "You talk; I'll listen." Scripture and the witness of millions of people agree that God hears when we pray. Isaiah says it in two sentences. *Then you shall call, and the lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, "Here I am. Before they call I will answer. While they are yet speaking, I will hear.*

But who among us seriously considers that God may initiate a call? Does it strain our jaded and sophisticated credulity to imagine that God may want to make contact, that God has something say, that communication with God may begin when we listen rather than when we speak?

The scriptures from cover to cover insist that God is the seeker, that human beings were created because God wanted conversation, that ever since Adan and Eve God has been calling in the cool of the day or the heat of the night, and humankind has been dodging the calls.

If I were to guess whether you believe God has ever called you about anything or for anything, I would hazard the opinion that most of you don't think so. Nor are you expecting a call. God may call preachers. Other people may be called. Crazy people may be called, but not the ordinary run of people, and certainly not you. God calling? Me?

Some of you would go further. You do not believe in divine calls at all. You would say

that such language is an expression of a fleshly phenomenon, not a spiritual reality. To speak of "call" is to reference one's sense of vocation, focus, purpose, destiny, and so it is. But what is the service of that sense? Is it from below or from above? Are we talking anthropology or theology—about the nature of humans or the nature of God? The Bible is unequivocal on this point. God calls! I leave it to you to argue with the Bible on this!

Still, not every call is from God. Any fool can feel called to preach (and I have personally known some of them!). All of this know from personal encounters. Calls, in order to be validated, must be tested. Thus, the call that every person receives in baptism must be validated in confirmation. The call to pastoral ministry is validated in the church through an in-care process culminating in ordination.

Having thus considered the concept of "call" abstractly, if briefly, let us turn now directly to our text for the day. Isaiah 43;1 is surely one of the great verses of the Bible, one that should be in your memory bank.

But now, thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
“Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name; you are mine.”

These words from God were spoken through the prophet more than 2,600 years ago to a hapless, helpless, hopeless people. Defeated, destitute, dispersed across the vast Babylonian empire, Israelites hungered for a word from the Lord. They got it.

God’s poetic utterance is a declaration of divine love and faithfulness, presence and power, redemption and deliverance. This is not a casual call from God; it is a 911 response to distress. God is dealing with emergency rescue in the face of a life-and-death crisis.

Just listen to these ringing affirmations:

1. God declares it is he who has created, formed, and made this people. They are not self-made. They are not, therefore in their own hands or in the hands of the Babylonians, but in the

hands of the One who has fabricated them.

A brief excursive question here asserts itself. In whose hands are you? Are you still laboring under the fiction that you are self-made? Is there a voice (dare I say call?) deep inside you that whispers or thunders that you belong to Another?

2. Twice in this passage God admonishes “fear not.” “Fear not, for I have redeemed you” “Fear not, for I am with you” To be redeemed is to be re-valued and reclaimed. The language is that of a prisoner exchange. What this means in hard, practical terms for Israel is repatriation, a return to their homeland, a restoration of their fortunes, a reconstruction of their cities, and a reconnection with culture and clan

More questions. Do you ever feel like a stranger in a strange land, a sojourner far from home, alone? Have you ever despaired of getting home again? Do you ever feel that your life,

when you get right down to it, isn't worth spit? Are you afraid? Then you hear the voice of One who knows you: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you. Fear not, for I am with you!"

3. God tells Israel that what is done for her is done because of who God is and whom God values. "For I am the Lord your God, the holy one of Israel, your Savior Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you."

Here's a flash for you. Whether or not you claim God's call, God's call claims you! Whether or not you choose God, you are chosen by God and precious. Whether or not you love God, God loves you. Whether or not you think you need a savior, God is your Savior.

4. God declares that Israel is known personally, by name. ("I have called you by name, you are mine.") Israel is also called by God's name ("every one who is known by my name"). Israel is not a fatherless child. Israel is honored and protected as a member of God's family.

When a parent gives a child a first name, the act of naming lays claim and gives identity to the infant. That name is personal, special and uniquely meaningful within the family. It is a sign of the child's individuality. But every child is also known by the family name. The family name is a sign that the child belongs to the family.

5. Israel is to be undaunted by danger. In deep water or in fiery trials she is secure. The presence of the Holy means protection. ("When you pass through the waters I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.")

This declaration has no meaning to anyone who has never been in deep water or had a trial by fire. It is incomprehensible to the one who has never felt awash in a flood of problems or experienced the heat in the kitchen.

Remarkably, there seem to be some such people around. There are those who have lived

carefully enough or been lucky enough to avoid the disasters that from time to time beset the rest of us. Irritated by such folk, Eileen Guder wrote:

You can live on bland food so as to avoid an ulcer; drink no tea or coffee or other stimulants, in the name of health; go to bed early and stay away from night life; avoid all controversial subjects so as never to give offense; mind your own business and avoid involvement in other people's problems; spend money only on necessities and save all you can. You can still break your neck in the bathtub, and it will serve you right!

We are reminded that even the most fortunate among us does not get out of life alive. The death rate is still 100%. The operative word in this verse is "when" not "if." When you are in over your head; when you are in a hot spot, not if you are. The Bible assumes trouble. Beyond that, what scripture means to say is that when we are cocooned by God's protection, destructive forces do not have the last word.

Today on our liturgical calendar is the Baptism of the Lord. The baptismal font and lighted candle in front of the lectern are symbolic reminders of Jesus' baptism, the occasion of his call and commission to ministry. Hence, our gospel reading from Matthew 3. Note here the images of water and fire, just as in Isaiah 43, which is also a baptism passage. Water and fire are two primordial elements with death-dealing and life-giving powers. They can kill and they can purify and heal. They are sources of light and life and darkness and death.

In baptism we are called to die a death and take up a new life. If you have been baptized, you have been called by God to a life of love and service. Acknowledge your baptism and own your call.

The Church has never quite outgrown its embarrassment and confusion over Jesus' baptism, wondering why he needed to be baptized and discomfited that he chose to be, whether or not he needed to be. Jesus' baptism makes him seem either too divine (he didn't need it) or too human (he did). We feel

like voyeurs, peeping in on this scene of unabashed parental pride, when God says, "This is my beloved Son, my boy, and I'm so proud of him!" It's Isaiah 43 all over again! "I have called you by name; you are mine; you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you."

If that kind of personal affirmation doesn't make you want to pick up your life and live it, you are dead already! Perhaps it's not so much Jesus' baptism but our own that embarrasses us. Baptism seems to have made so little difference. Has baptism been for us John Calvin's definition of a sacrament: "the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace?" Or has it been a cute (if soggy) rite, signifying nothing? Surely our life with God and each other means more than that.

The more I know of Salem in Ballwin United Methodist Church, the more convinced I am that she is being summoned to live her life boldly, as if she knew the voice of the Caller who said, "Fear not, for I am with you; I have called you by name; you are mine!"

The more of you I know, the more I know about you personally, the more convinced I am that God is calling to you at the deep places of your life. Be attentive. Listen to your life. You may be listening to the Lord . . . God calling!

