

Tough Call
Matthew 16:21-28 & Exodus 3:1-15
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When I was seeking to be ordained, there was a man on my ordination council who asked me why and how I felt called to the ministry. He put a little extra mustard on that word “called,” almost as if he wanted me to share a story where the phone rang, God was on the other end of the line, and that was when I learned I would be a pastor. I didn’t have a story like that. I wasn’t even sure how I felt about the word “call” in this context. People my age were constantly saying they felt *called* to do things, and I thought “it sounds to me like you just *want* to do that.” You know, someone would say something like “I really feel *called* to be the kind of pastor who just hangs out in bars all the time and never goes to church and ministers that way.” And I would think, “what a convenient ‘call’ you’ve had since you already hang out in bars all the time” and say nothing.

Even if you’re someone with a more traditional “call,” it feels arrogant to say that God asked you to do it. I told my ordination council as much: something to the effect of “I’m not confident that there’s anything different or special about me, if that’s what you’re asking.” The guy who asked the question didn’t particularly care for that answer.

Neither did my theology professor, who appreciated my lack of bravado but who also wanted me to say confidently that God was at work in me. He also pushed me to find a way to articulate that God was directing me toward specific actions of service, the kinds of actions we typically recognize with ordination, and the ordination council turned into something of a lively debate (which isn’t really what you want—it’s kind of like a job interview or a first date turning into a lively debate).

Eventually, we reached something of an agreement and they ordained me (lest you think your church accidentally hired a pastor who hadn’t been ordained). But I honestly can’t tell you what the agreement was, just that it felt like an uneasy one. I still had a lot of thinking to do about what it meant to be *called*.

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Thinking about it led me to last week’s scripture, where Jesus says to Peter “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven” and “on you I will build my church.” That feels like a *call* story that would have appeased the guy on my ordination council: “Jesus gave me the keys.” The problem is that last week’s scripture is followed by this week’s scripture, wherein Jesus refers to Peter as “Satan” and a “stumbling block.” It’s kind of hard to put too much stake in having the keys if you’ve also been admonished for wrecking the car, and all of this happens in the span of just a few short verses. We read about Jesus elevating Peter to the highest of highs and then condemning him with an insult that cuts to the bone. They have something of a weird relationship.

Peter and Jesus, however, seem downright boring when we compare their relationship with the one featured in the Exodus passage this morning. At least Peter & Jesus are both in human form. In Exodus, we read about a man’s relationship with a fiery shrubbery. And while this relationship isn’t marked by the same juxtapositions that we see in Peter & Jesus, it’s still

mysterious. In case the general setting isn't peculiar enough, the scripture emphasizes the oddness of the relationship by making sure that we know that the bush was on fire and yet not burned up, and the passage ends with God answering Moses cryptically "I AM who I AM." Much like Peter & Jesus, Moses & God have a weird relationship.

Beyond that initial weirdness, there is one more commonality: Jesus asks Peter to lead his church and then immediately gets frustrated with him, and the bush commands Moses to lead God's people...and then immediately gets frustrated with him.

Other than this, they are very different stories: Moses is timid and tries to beg off the command issued to him, quivering, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" Peter, meanwhile, is eager and confident, first asserting that Jesus is the Messiah when no one else will and then displaying the audacity to rebuke Jesus. In Exodus, we read about a glorious plan to release the Israelites from bondage. In Matthew, Jesus speaks bleakly about a time of great suffering. Moses is told to get out in front of the people and in front of Pharaoh; Peter is told to get behind. In many ways, these two stories don't really seem to go together at all...except that they are both call stories, and they are both stories that feature a frustrated God.

If these stories have nothing else in common, then it suggests that our calls and God's vexation somehow go together...and that seems even more mysterious than a talking burning bush.

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My go-to for making sense of the mystery of God is often to think about a familial example. I think most of you know that I have three daughters. With each of them, I could tell stories where I found myself saying "you are my reason for living" one moment and "you will be the death of me" in the next. My guess is that my own parents said these same things about me (you can ask my mom after the service if you want), and that most parents know exactly what I'm talking about from their own experiences as well. In fact, it seems that we are *only* moved to these extremes by those we truly and fervently love. Love possesses such power that it regularly drives us to the ends of our emotional spectrums.

When I read Jesus saying "Blessed are you Simon" and "Get behind me Satan" a mere 5 verses apart, what I really read is Jesus saying "I speak to you out of love, Peter." That's not a great justification for Jesus to call Peter "Satan," but it's the element of this story that seems the clearest to me (and, as a result, it seems like an important takeaway). The two Matthean passages coupled together show us that Jesus loves Peter vulnerably and deeply, like a parent loves a child. Part of what Jesus is saying here is "I love you."

Of course, he is saying more than that. Jesus speaks with great eloquence here, using the name Peter—which I think most of us know means "rock"—as a pun in each story. In today's scripture, he alludes to that specifically by calling Peter a "stumbling block." In the story that precedes today's scripture, Peter is the cornerstone. In both stories—and, through his nomenclature, beyond—Peter is a rock.

The question for us, naturally, is how Peter goes from one to the other so quickly. We desire to be cornerstone and not stumbling block. The fact that Peter—Peter, the rock!—fills both roles is a little intimidating to us. How can we ensure that we are one and not the other?

Not surprisingly, the answer may be found in the scripture itself. Before Jesus refers to Peter as Satan and a stumbling block, he issues to Peter an important directive: “get behind me.” At first, it seems that these words mean something like “get out of my way” or “get out of my sight.” By calling Peter a stumbling block and also saying “get behind me,” Jesus seems dismissive of him, and it makes perfect sense that he would be.

Multiple scholars, however, read these three words to mean not “get out of my way” but rather “get my back” or “get in line.” Jesus isn’t dismissing Peter but is instead reminding Peter where Peter’s place is. Peter isn’t supposed to pull Jesus aside and rebuke him; Peter is supposed to follow Jesus. A rock out in the open is a hazard; one put in its proper place becomes a foundation. Peter, despite his best intentions, has to get in the right place. He has to get behind.

Peter may have been confused because Jesus has just told him that he would have the keys to the kingdom, essentially that his every wish would come true. Jesus describes Peter in a place of dizzying power. Peter misses the importance of Jesus’ first description, that of “cornerstone.” The cornerstone of a building determines everything else about it: whether it will stand or fall, which way it will lean, how secure it will be. The cornerstone is also, most of the time, overlooked. It is not nearly as functional as a door, not as beautiful as a stained-glass window, not as impressive as a steeple. Jesus does not invite Peter to be any of these things, but rather to be a rock. The cornerstone.

“Get behind me,” Jesus says to Peter, “and be that cornerstone I know you to be. Be the one I can build on. Do not get out in front and try to direct what will happen; that is a job for someone else. Be my rock.”

Once we reconcile these two comments made to Peter, we’re left with a picture of someone who is encouraged to lead by serving. That image is still vastly different from the depiction of Moses, who is asked to lead by getting in the spotlight. And yet, Moses’ timidity and Peter’s over-eagerness generate the same response from God: one where God accentuates—perhaps with exasperation—that the human involved is human and God is God. When God says to Moses “I will be with you” and “I AM who I AM,” it is not that different from Jesus saying to Peter “Get behind me” and “on you I will build my church.” In both cases, the divine leader does not shy away from the steep challenge placed before the human but instead encourages by reminding Peter & Moses that God is with them. Reading these stories together paints a picture of how we are called to lead by humbling ourselves before God and allowing God to put us in positions of significance...even if we regularly find those positions uncomfortable or unfamiliar.

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I love being a minister. I love being a part of people’s faith development. I love being someone who people turn to in times of challenge or crisis. I love that I get to use so many different parts of who I am to do what I do.

I love being a father for many of the same reasons. I love watching my kids grow and develop. I love that they turn to me when they’re upset or overwhelmed. I love that my daughters are integrated into every aspect of who I am.

And at the same time...being a dad can be exhausting. We spend a lot of time in the car, to the point that part of me is ready for my oldest to start driving at age 11 so that I can remove “chauffeur” from my parental job description. There are times when my children are upset and

my first reaction is “what is it *this* time?” There are times when I just want five minutes to myself, and my kids won’t allow for it.

I love being a dad, and yet the very things I love about it are often the parts that wear me out the most.

I bet you can guess where this is going: Like parenting, there are also days when I think the very things I love about being a minister will be the end of me. There are times when I think I can’t handle another challenge or crisis. There are times when I feel like my job is requiring too many different parts of me, and I wish I could set some of them aside for safekeeping.

The individual parts of our faiths and our calls are each, at the same time, both fantastic and overwhelming.

Jesus, in these passages, seems to me to be someone who is simultaneously thrilled and frustrated by the rock that is Peter. God, speaking through the burning bush, seems to be someone who is simultaneously thrilled and frustrated by the servant that is Moses. It seems like it shouldn’t make sense...and yet, to anyone who has loved a child, a parent, a spouse, a sibling, a friend...it makes perfect sense. When I read this scripture, it leads me to believe that my love for others not only will send me to the highest peaks but also will aggravate me to no end. It’s supposed to work like that, something I actually find a little comforting. Based on what I see in Jesus, that is how love should be. That is who we should be. And if we believe that God loves us, that is how our calls will be.

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The story of Moses at the burning bush is arguably the most famous “call” story in all of the scriptures. Moses, this meek shepherd minding his own business, is somewhat accosted by a flaming angel that appears in the wilderness. He (remarkably) doesn’t freak out, recognizes the holiness of the moment, and waits for God to instruct him. And God tells him to do the very thing that terrifies him the most: go back into Egypt and confront the most powerful man he’s ever known.

The story of Peter is also a “call” story. One cannot read “upon this rock I will build my church” as anything other than a story about what the future will hold for Peter. Understanding “get behind me” to reinforce that future (rather than to undo it) means that we’re seeing Jesus emphasize a second time the call of Peter. And, like Moses, Peter is being asked to do something that sounds drastically and wholly unappealing. He is being asked to let go of control, to step back into the shadows, and to allow himself to be overtaken in almost every way imaginable.

Both of these passages are about who Moses and Peter are—about their identities—but they are even more about their calls. They are stories about what God is going to push them to do, about the ways that God is going to use them to achieve something bigger than any one human being. Our identities are connected to our calls, but they are not the same thing.

These two call stories, despite their many differences, remind us that our call is going to be hard. In fact, “hard” isn’t the right word. Our calls are going to require us to confront our fears, to set aside our own ambitions, to do things that sound drastically and wholly unappealing. Like Peter, our “getting behind Jesus” isn’t something we get to dictate. If we try to, then we’re no longer in our proper places.

Our calls ought to fill us with great joys...but they are also going to push us, to frustrate us, to exhaust us, to disconcert us, and to scare us. That is how calls work...and how our identities work...and how love works. It is how the things that are the most important in our lives and in our worlds work. It is how we know that they are real.

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I have wrestled with this scripture for a long time, and I am still not comfortable with Jesus addressing Peter with “Satan.” I have read multiple commentaries on this passage, and they all kind of sweep that word under the rug. They claim that Jesus is actually talking to Satan, not Peter, which I find wholly unconvincing. I really wanted to find someone who argued that the Greek word used here isn’t actually “Satan” but rather something softer, and I never could. I’m unable to offer you a clean and satisfying explanation of that word in this sentence, and I’ll just have to keep wrestling with it. No matter how you slice it, this is not a soft passage.

But it is a passage about love—genuine, overwhelming, confusing, consuming love. And it is a passage about something glorious, even if it is challenging.

Our calls are not soft calls, so that they may lead to something transformative.

The love to which we’re called is not a soft love, but it is spectacular and mesmerizing.

The God that we worship is not a soft God, albeit a God of life-changing mercy.

Part of how we know that these are intertwined—our purpose, our essence, our love, our God—is because they share these paradoxical qualities of challenge and glory.

When we do things right—when we get behind Jesus in the way that he asks us to, when we make ourselves cornerstone instead of stumbling block—we will experience not only challenge and struggle but also joy and excitement and love like nothing we can imagine.