

January 14th, 2024
Second Sunday after Epiphany
First Reading: 1 Samuel 3: 1-10
Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18
Gospel: John 1: 43-51
Other referenced Scripture passages: Mark 1: 14-20; 1 Timothy 1: 12

“The Call Is Upon Us”

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight
for you are our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

There is a billboard that I frequently drive by when I return home from school while passing through Jacksonville and on my way to school when I go through Athens rather than around the town. It seeks to teach the ABCs of Christianity. At the very top, it asks, “Going to Heaven?” and then in a child’s block letters: A- Admit you’re a sinner; B- Believe Jesus is Lord; C- Call upon His name. Now, I agree these ABCs are a good starting point for the Christian faith but, in today’s passages, it seems a lot more like Jesus and God are calling *our* names, rather than us calling theirs.

There are multiple call stories in today’s readings. God is calling, Jesus is calling. It’s not written in there but it’s a safe bet the Holy Spirit is making some calls too. Next Sunday, when Vic preaches, features a reading from Mark 1: 14-20 about the calling of the first disciples. Jesus goes to Galilee, proclaiming the good news as he meanders along. “The time has come,” he says, “the kingdom of God is near.” He goes to the Sea of Galilee, which is actually a freshwater lake, and Jesus makes gathering followers look really easy. He heads to the shore, scopes out a few fishermen, and literally says one sentence to them, “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men”. Scripture tells us Simon and Andrew, “at once... left their nets and followed him”; Jesus does the same with James and John and they too appear to promptly drop everything

and go with him, leaving their father, Zebedee, and the hired men behind in the boat. I wonder what the disciples were thinking: Will being a fisher of people be easier because it's less weather dependent work? What kind of bait does one use to lure humans? We're probably going to need bigger nets.

Philip took even less convincing- a 2 word phrase, barely considered a full sentence in English. "Follow me", Jesus says, and yet another disciple is formed. Now, Nathanael was a tougher convert, incredulous, and borderline sarcastic when his friend, Philip, encourages him to go and meet Jesus. The Message puts Nathanael's exchange with Philip, and then Jesus, in this way: "Philip went and found Nathanael and told him, 'We've found Jesus, Joseph's son, the one from Nazareth!' Nathanael replied, 'Nazareth! You've got to be kidding.'" (The NIV quotes him as saying, "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?") Phillip urges him along and tells him to "come and see for [him]self". Jesus sees Nathanael approaching and says, "There's a real Israelite, not a false bone in his body." To this Nathanael reacts again in disbelief, "Where did you get that idea? You don't know me." Based on Psalm 139, this is not true. Jesus does know him but, like Samuel does not yet know God, Nathanael does not yet know Jesus. Jesus mentions Nathanael sitting under a fig tree and convinces Nathanael that he is indeed talking to the Son of God, the King of Israel, calling him Rabbi or Teacher, and that perhaps Nac-areth is not a worthless dump after all. Jesus' response, "You've become a believer simply because I say I saw you one day sitting under the fig tree? You haven't seen anything yet! Before this is over you're going to see heaven open and God's angels descending to the Son of Man and ascending again." That's quite the imagery and, what Nathanael may have said about all this we don't know but, at this point in the conversation, I assume he was convinced of Christ's divinity.

Given all this talk of calls from the Bible passages today, it felt only natural to talk about my call story. I really hesitate to even use the word call at all because it felt, and still does feel, much more like a long drawn out whisper with no clear end in sight. Trying to describe the call of God is difficult but Thomas Long puts it quite well in his co-authored book *The Good*

Funeral: Death, Grief, and the Community of Care:

“...It is clear to me in retrospect that ultimately I didn’t exactly volunteer for this; I got recruited. I believe I was called to ministry. That is the truth, but saying it feels discomfoting. Nothing seems to put up a firewall between clergy and the rest of us, between pastors and ordinary, sane people more than this idea of call... We are a special tribe who somehow get whispered to in the midnight hour by white-robed Star Wars figures who speak in sepulchral voices, ‘Go to seminary. The Force will be with you.’ But this is misleading. The fact of the matter is that most people who end up as priests, ministers, and pastors are not religious virtuosi at all, bear few markings of saints, and have made no As in purity of heart. In fact, most of us clergy spend at least some time explaining to the astonished people who knew us in our youth just how someone with our temperament and track record ended up as one of God’s sky pilots.”¹

My dad was raised strictly Roman Catholic but converted to Lutheranism when he married my mom. Had he not converted, I doubt I would have seen a woman pastor growing up; I did not even realize being a female preacher was controversial until I moved to Deep East Texas. My name seems coincidental, at least, and at times, ironic. I am the third child of five daughters; any one of us could have been named Christina, which means, unsurprisingly, “follower of Christ”, yet I am the one who went into ministry work, I am the one who pursues a Master of Divinity, I am the one leaning into the whispers and trying to figure out what they are calling me to do next. Here I am, Lord. Is it really I, Lord? I *have* heard you calling in the night. Like the disciples in our Scripture lesson, Christ called to me from the shore to follow him, although it took a little longer for me to leave the boat and drop my nets.

¹ Long, p. 38-39

When I first read this passage from Samuel, I could not help but make a connection between Samuel and myself. Samuel is living in the tabernacle; I have been ‘living’ the Austin Heights church life for years and have even slept in the sanctuary once for the youth lock in. Samuel did not know God yet and the word of God had not been revealed to him. I’ve always felt like I have ‘known God’, but it seemed the word of God was still hiding out, waiting for the right time and place to reveal itself more fully to me. Even the name Samuel itself indicates further parallels; we both have God written in our names. In Hebrew, שְׁמוּאֵל, literally breaks down to “name of God” or “heard by God”, depending on the translation. And like Samuel being called by God as he goes to lay down in his place, I believe God was calling me in the night when I had recurring dreams for years about returning to school.

Then we have the character of Eli. For me, Kyle is Eli- seeing, or in the case of the reading, hearing something I did not initially recognize as God. Bob Choate is Eli when after my second sermon he held my hands, looked into my eyes with tears on the edges of his, asking me if I “was hearing the call?”. Eli is Louise when she tells me she believes I was meant to pastor a congregation. And like Samuel, I thought the call was something or someone else. It took repetition on God’s part for the call to become clear. Four times in the case of Samuel, many more times for myself. And as Thomas Long writes, there is a discomfort with being called to work for God in this very public way. As if being a “follower of Christ” were not already hard enough, now it seems God wants to up the ante by having me go to seminary. Now, the parallels stop there. I am by no means suggesting I am like Samuel, a renowned prophet with a perfect record; nor are Kyle’s daughters the modern day versions of Eli’s sinful sons who eventually suffer the wrath of God.

To quote Long again, “Like Abraham, like Moses, like Paul, like Sarah and Lydia, we clergy are mostly folks who were minding our own business, happy to be goatherds, pharmacists, or hedge fund managers, when suddenly a bush burst into flames and a voice informs us that Plan B is now in effect... Burning bushes, I have learned, are almost never as dramatic in actual experience as they seem in Scripture. The call to ministry is rarely a Start Wars moment. Instead, the burning bush turns out to be a book we read, a speaker we heard, a tugging at our heart that won’t go away, ... a random observation by a friend.”

There were certainly no dramatic, ‘burning bush moments’ for me. My call started off very subtly. I found myself being drawn into Scripture when I served as the worship leader. Of course, I had read my Bible before, but it was different when I was asked to read it for God’s people and compose a meaningful prayer from the selected passage. The whisper would keep nudging me along; at times, I eagerly followed like when I was asked to work with the youth group. My visit to SMU and the various speakers at the convocation further pushed me down the path. While driving home from the event, I heard a radio preacher who was bashing anyone who dared call God ‘Mother’, insistent that only God the Father was acceptable; I thought about his words, instantly understood he was talking about me, about us... And realized that maternal verbiage was what got me in church and kept me in church, so someone needs to keep using it to bring others into the body of Christ, into this community of love and acceptance. Why not me?

There were other moments when I doubted God’s call and questioned the direction in which I was headed. I went out on a limb and applied to grad school. SMU called me on my birthday to congratulate me on my acceptance; the full ride scholarship from the Baptist House of Studies a week later further paved the way. I would ask God how we were going to make this work and then a door would open. Kyle (and many of you) saw the spark inside me long before I

did. I'm convinced had Kyle not been listening for God's call, I'm not sure I would be up here right now, set to start the second semester of my M. Div on Tuesday.

For Philip, Andrew, Simon, James, and John; it took only one simple phrase to hear the call and promptly respond. Others, like Samuel, needed to be called repeatedly. Still others are like Nathanael, who do not take the call at face value, and need convincing. I admit I am most like Samuel. It was not a single sentence call and, boom, I knew God was talking to me and wanted things from me. Samuel had to be called four times before he knew what was happening, and it took another, namely Eli, to recognize the call as one from above. And God kept calling, exercising great patience and persistence, until the message was received.

Here's the other thing about these calls- they apply to everyone. You'll notice the title of my sermon is not "Christina Got Called" or "Christina's Calling". To use another illustration from Long's book, "...burning bush experiences are not confined to the clergy... God, it seems, has everybody's number and is constantly making calls, summoning us all beyond ourselves to some holy vocation. Clergy are simply the visible icons of what is secretly true of all mortals."² It pains me to say this but, I am not special. Kyle, George, Vic, are not God's specially chosen servants either. It might seem like it, and I cannot deny that being called to ministry does come with its own unique set of feelings, but 'special' is not one of them. We are all called, and we must listen closely over the other noises and distractions, because sometimes it is a whisper, and easily goes by unnoticed or mistaken for something else altogether.

Most of us have served on a committee or three, regularly signing up to provide meals or helping out with Children's Church, and generally just showing up when needed. The deacons

² Long, p. 40-41

answered their own calls to serve and are pivotal to the operations and spiritual formation of the church. The Prayers and Squares quilters iron, cut, sew, bind, and tie their call into every piece they make. The missions committee, spearheaded by Maggie's passion, is exploring the call to support an immigrant family. The Sunday School teachers answer a call that elicits few excited responses. The list of calls goes on; I could spend the rest of the service naming those who have answered God's call, and I would venture to say nearly every person in this room has responded to it at least once.

However, the call might not be as straightforward as writing your name down on a clipboard; the call might not even be directly related to the church. For years, the Richardsons and the Chisms responded to the call to recycle and repurpose glass that was otherwise going to the landfill. Ingo and Louise have been called to serve as Opa and Oma to Ceiba, functioning as a stable support system for a little girl and her father, during one of the most challenging times of their lives. I feel called to ride public transportation while I stay in Dallas. And while the call may not seem to start out with God at the forefront, when you follow it, eventually you will run in to Her.

How does Psalm 139 support this idea of call, you may ask? "You have searched me and you know me." (Ps. 139:1) God knows what we are capable of, and His call will fall within the parameters of our capabilities. "You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways." (Ps. 139: 3) God knows what we are up to, and you can bet He's keeping an eye out for when our 'going out' and 'ways' are in response to His call. "Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." (Ps. 139: 4,16b) God knows when we will step up to the plate before we even know we are being asked to go to bat. My favorite section of this psalm, "You

have laid your hand upon me.” (Ps. 139: 5b) The best and most comforting part is having God by our side through it all; when we answer the call, God is right there, cheering us on and blessing us as we go.

The other thing about the call is that it never stops. God never says, “Okay, we’re all done here, Austin Heights. Great work out there! Go have Sabbath time for the rest of your days until Jesus returns.” In the NIV, Romans 11:29 says “for God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable”; this same verse in *The Message*: “God’s gifts and God’s call are under full warranty – never canceled, never rescinded”. In other words, God’s call is binding, final, not to be withdrawn, a guarantee. This idea can be overwhelming, intimidating, and just plain inconvenient. In her book, *Beautiful and Terrible Things* Rev. Dr. Amy Butler writes “[t]he Church is not God, but in its best self it can be God in human form.”³ I believe one way this ‘best self’ of the Church can be achieved is by listening for God’s call and asking the Holy Spirit’s guidance in how to respond. Butler writes that we should “Turn, and refocus our eyes on the one who calls us toward abundant life.”⁴ Are we looking for Jesus on the shoreline, beckoning us towards him? And are we willing to drop our nets and go?

Look, I get it. We do not always want to hear God’s call. At times, we struggle to hear the call. Sometimes, we actively turn away from the call of God and blatantly ignore it... but God will persist and has a far greater aptitude for waiting us out than we do waiting for God to give up. 1 Timothy 1: 12 says “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service.” Hopefully, we recognize by now that this appointment goes beyond the person standing behind this pulpit. And when the call goes out,

³ Butler, p. 81

⁴ Butler, p. 63

because it will go out, I pray we are prepared to answer it as eagerly as Samuel, as unhesitatingly as Philip, John, James, Andrew, and Simon, and even doubtfully like Nathanael. Above all, my prayer is that our response will be this: “Speak, God, for your servants are listening” (1 Samuel 3:10b- paraphrased).

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One True God, Mother of us
all. Amen.