

GOD CALLING!
Isaiah 49: 1-7 & I Corinthians 1: 1-9
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From Today's Text: Isaiah

Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The Lord called me before I was born; while I was in my mother's womb he named me. He made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand, he hid me. He made me a polished arrow; in his quiver he hid me away. And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified...I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

From Today's Text: I Corinthians

From Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of god, and our brother Sosthenes – to the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

AN AIRPORT EPIPHANY

I'm with a mission team and we're on our way home from Nicaragua. We have a layover in the Houston airport – three, three and a half hours. We've eaten dinner and we're just killing time walking through the gift shops. One gift shop is a bookstore. I'm scanning the titles.

Back in Nicaragua we have visited the Managua city dump where about two thousand of the poorest of the poor make their homes in shacks, lean-tos, and shanties. Open sewers run through the lanes between the houses. Pigs and chickens run wild. Dogs fight over scraps.

There is a medical clinic, but no one can afford to go there because, while the doctor is free, you still have to pay for anything you use – bandages, stitches, needles, pills, vaccines, antiseptic, anything.

The children have no shoes. They play soccer on a homemade field of dirt and cinders. They make toys out of the trash they find. They have all been taught not to eat anything they pick up in the dump, and usually they don't. But sometimes, when they are really hungry...

The pervasive smoke is caused by spontaneous combustion and there's a sour, burning stench that permeates everything.

About ten miles away, At Project Chacocente near the town of Massiah, we talked and worked and played with about sixty-two people, eight extended families, who have, thanks to the United Methodist Church and other charities, made it out of the dump. Any of them who are over five years of age, which is most of them, can still remember living there.

But here the air is clean and fresh. Here they have their own home, twenty feet by twenty feet with a concrete floor and cinder block walls with a tin roof. Homes they built for themselves with a little help from us. They are done with shanties and shacks. This year another twenty

square feet was added to each home for a shower and a kitchen or whatever they want to do with it.

Many of their children have bicycles and soccer balls and shade to play in. They go to school in a building that their parents built for them. They learn to read and do math; they learn about their heritage as Nicaraguans, and they learn to speak proper Spanish...and English. They learn music and art and dance and etiquette and citizenship. And Phys. Ed. – baseball, soccer and other sports and games that they could never before afford to play.

These are all modest things. By American standards these people would still be considered very poor. But there is no poverty in their eyes or their smiles. They are happy and healthy and proud of their achievements. They each have two acres to grow whatever they like, and they are growing tomatoes and plantains, papayas and corn, peanuts and a dozen fruits that I cannot pronounce. And there are 15 acres of common land for growing community crops, mostly plantains and papayas but peanuts, too.

And this year, perhaps the greatest sign of hope to emerge from Project Chacocente, several of the residents have planted trees – fruit trees. Oranges and lemons and limes that won't bear fruit for another five years but are tremendous signs of confidence and hope.

They bought a horse this year, and a cart for him to pull so they can carry heavy loads around the project and the community. Some of those heavy loads will be the crops they will harvest and take to market to sell.

And the well. Let us sing of the well that supplies the entire community with fresh, clean water. Water for bathing and drinking and watering their plants so they can grow crops in the dry season. It cost \$48 thousand and it was drilled 600 feet deep through bed rock by Living Waters, a Christian organization that goes all over the world and digs wells at their cost, for people in need of clean, potable water.

It is true that gasoline is so expensive that the generator that operates the pump can be turned on for only an hour a day but what an hour that is. Everyone showers at that time – all the homes have showers, now. And every home has a barrel or a holding tank they fill so they have water all day. This, after sometimes going for weeks without water, having to buy it and carry it to the project in three-gallon bottles.

We have ridden two hours in a very old, very slow school bus and we have arrived at Project Chacocente where we have been embraced, welcomed, greeted and treated warmly by people who have no reason to like us but do anyway. These are poor people. Eighty percent of them live on less than \$8 per day and seventy percent are unemployed or employed at the subsistence level -- work today, eat today. Their country is the second poorest in the western hemisphere, second only to Haiti. As Americans we represented wealth and luxury that is unobtainable and, if it were not for American television, would be unimaginable to all but a few.

We have been called brothers and sister, honored guests, friends and fellow Christians. And we cried when we left, sad that it would be more than a year before we could return.

We are tired. Our minds are reeling from the experience we have just had. Our muscles ache from the work we did the previous day. We have just eaten our first American meal in nearly a week, and it has tasted just the slightest bit strange to us.

And now we are walking around in the airport gift shops killing time.

One of those gift shops is a bookstore. There is a section of books labeled “religion/spirituality.”

Prominently displayed in the center of that section is a book whose title leaps off the shelf at me: *God Wants You to Be a Millionaire*, by Collin Thomas.

I think, “Really? Me? God wants me to be a millionaire?” I pick up the book and look at the cover, trying in vain to find a reference to where in scripture it says that. I would look in a Bible but, ironically, there aren’t any in the religion/spirituality section of the bookstore.

WELL, MAYBE NOT YOU

God wants you to be a millionaire.

Presumably this is the same God who tells us, through John the Baptizer, in the third chapter of Luke’s gospel that if we have two coats and our neighbor has none, we are to share one of our coats with our neighbor. And we’re supposed to do the same thing with food and with everything we own.

Kind of a circuitous route to becoming a millionaire, don’t you think? Does God really call people to become millionaires?

Then why did Jesus tell the rich young man to sell everything he had and give it to the poor?

If God really wants us – and I’m assuming that the “you” referred to on the front of that book was a collective “you,” that the author was not just referring to me, specifically, but to all of us – if God really wants us to be millionaires why does his son never say as much? Why does he tell us that it is only by feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, visiting the sick and the imprisoned and giving water to the thirsty that we really are like him?

If God is calling me to be a millionaire, why did he give me gifts that don’t pay so well? Oh, I make a good living, a very nice, even extravagant living compared to my friends in Nicaragua, but really, a millionaire? Not hardly.

God didn’t call Cheryl Avery to become a millionaire, and she was well on her way. She owned her own company and lived in New York City and was pulling down a very comfortable six-figure income. She was wearing expensive suits with names like Gucci and Yves St. Laurent on the labels.

And then, she says, God called her to do something completely different. It started with an Emmaus Walk and then an invitation from a friend to come on a mission trip to Nicaragua. The next thing she knew she had sold her company and was taking a refresher course to improve her high school and college Spanish.

A compulsion had come over her. God, she said, was calling her to Nicaragua and she could not, not hear that call. Get my people out of that dump! Give them a second chance! Help them help themselves to a better life! You have the gifts and the skills. You have the drive and the energy. "As you have done it to the least of these, you have done it unto me."

Clearly, God did not want Cheryl Avery to be a millionaire. What he wanted her to do was chuck it all – career, apartment, BMW, pension, everything and go to Nicaragua and start Project Chacocente. Her. By herself, with a little help from us.

The movie on the airplane from Houston to Columbus was "The Nanny Diaries." It's a little piece of fluff about a girl who doesn't know what she is being called to do with her life so, while she figures it out, she becomes a nanny for some mean, self centered, egotistical, spoiled millionaires who have allowed their wealth to separate them from everything that is important in life – even their own families.

She learns and helps her employers learn that wealth is a tool, not a goal. God is not mentioned in the film but he's there – calling people to be something other than millionaires.

Everywhere I looked, there it was – God calling. The lectionary readings, readings which I had read and written down before I left the U.S., the ones we read, this morning, were coming to life before my very eyes.

God calls his people. And his call is hearable and knowable. Just like God called Cheryl Avery to start Project Chacocente and just like God called me to the pastoral ministry, just like God called Mother Theresa to the streets of Calcutta and St. Paul to the gentile countries of the Roman Empire, just like all of those, God is calling you and not just the collective you but each individual one of you. God is calling you by name. Regardless of your age, race, or station in life.

Not to be a millionaire but to be a faithful disciple, a follower of his word, a citizen of his kingdom.

The specifics of that call are for you to hear, discern and heed. What is God calling you to be and do, specifically, in the world, today? Thankfully, scripture and history give us some precedents to guide our discernment. They are, I believe, three in number. And they are, mercifully, brief.

HOW GOD CALLS US

1. God tends to call individuals or small teams, not committees.

When God needed a king for his people he called Saul. When he needed a new king, he called David. When he needed an apostle to the gentiles he called Paul. Jesus had twelve disciples but he had an inner circle of three – Peter, James and John. Call the roll of biblical heroes -- Gideon, Samson, Jacob, Abraham, Deborah, Esther – the scriptural record is clear. God calls individuals and small teams to do his bidding. They then recruit others for help.

Every ministry that has ever succeeded has started with a single visionary champion and then a small group who became the spearhead that propelled it forward.

2. God does not call those who are equipped, God equips those who are called.

God calls Samuel to be a prophet, but it takes four tries before Samuel actually hears the call because Samuel was just a kid and “did not yet know the Lord.”

God calls Jeremiah to be a prophet, and Jeremiah tells him he can’t possibly be a prophet because he’s only a teenager. God’s response: “Do not say ‘I am but a youth.’ For I will tell you what to say and who to say it to.”

God calls Isaiah to be a prophet and Isaiah says, “Yes!” Then, when he hears what God has in store for him, he wants to know how long the assignment is going to take.

God calls Saul to be king. Samuel anoints Saul and Saul says “Thanks,” then turns to go back to his field where he was plowing. Samuel has to tell him that, no, the plowing will have to be done by someone else as he now has king stuff to do, stuff for which plowing has ill prepared him. He’s going to have to learn on the job.

3. God’s call is an experience that is always consistent with scripture, tradition and reason.

The record of scripture and tradition, of history and reason is clear. There is a pattern to the way God calls his people to ministry.

First God identifies a need, he hears the cry of the people, he sees the suffering of his children, he notices an injustice, an insult, an injury.

Then God calls one of his people to address and, sometimes, correct the situation. He calls a prophet to warn the people or to comfort them as the need dictates. He calls a priest to console them and speak on their behalf. He calls a leader to lead them, a teacher to teach them, an organizer to organize them, a preacher to inspire them, a physician to heal them. Or he calls a technician or a mechanic or an engineer or craftsman to show them how to solve the problem.

These called persons then recruit others to help them as needed.

All of which leaves us with one question, today.

What, brothers and sisters, is God calling you to do in this new year? What is God calling US to do in 2026? That is the question before us as we move ahead. It is to that question that I will be directing my prayers and, I hope, you will be directing yours as well.

AMEN