

<Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-11; John 1:29-42>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

I can't recall if I've shared with you yet the story of how I knew I was being led into ministry. The realization that I was being called into ministry came as a bit of a surprise to me, particularly at the time. It was early in the spring semester of my Junior year of college, when I was on a weekend retreat with the Christian Fellowship group I was a part of, and a leader for.

Now, having initially gone to college to study geology, and then discovering the sciences weren't really my thing, I had taken some time exploring other subjects in order to determine a major and graduate on time. But I still had no idea what to do with my life, what path to follow, once I had my diploma in hand. Over the course of my Sophomore year and into that Junior year I had moved on from what my parents called the "major of the week" carousel, where I would excitedly call them each week to tell them what my new major might be, onto the "career of the month" carousel. I explored many exciting career options including underwater welding, studying to be a paramedic, or just taking time to hike a notable long-distance trail. At the time of the weekend retreat, I had actually begun to settle my thoughts on enlisting in the Coast Guard; much of what had my attention at that time in my life included the ideas of lifeguarding, emergency rescue and medicine, and the idea of jumping out of helicopters. I actually had the enlistment papers in hand to sign and submit but had held off for the time being.

But now I was on this weekend retreat with a group of friends and colleagues, led by our campus chaplain, and the broad theme of the weekend was discernment. It was all about listening for the voice of God calling, and what it might entail to respond and follow where God led. And for February, it was somewhat warm; the weekend was rainy instead of snowy, and though a bit chilly, it was not so cold as to keep me from going for a hike that Saturday afternoon. We were encouraged to go out on our own, and to spend an hour or so in silence. I exited the lodge we were meeting in and turned my feet up the hill behind it.

After a few minutes, nearing the top, I came to a small clearing which had the trunk of a cut tree in it. So I sat on it, not minding the slight damp, and simply opened myself to whatever was around me at the time - the breeze in the trees, the birds singing their songs, the damp earth and smell of early spring. And while I can't be sure how long I sat there, I can say that that is where God found me.

How did you first recognize that God has called each of you?

It seems to me that, when we think on the call stories of our Scriptures, the occasions in which God or Jesus place a particular call on an individual - Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Joshua, Isaiah, the disciples, Paul, etc. - that we imagine a degree of clarity and direction. That, once the call is offered, the individual in question knows what to do and has only negligible hesitancy to follow. We ascribe degrees of certainty, and then in our own lives of faith we wonder why we don't receive the same kind of clarity and guidance from God when we might desire it ourselves. Our own lives of faith all too often seem to be determined by questions of "How do I know God is calling me?" and "How will I know what to do?" and "How can I be sure this is what God wants of me?"

In truth, the calling of God rarely comes with specific and concrete instructions. Even in particular situations, it is rare that God specifies what is to be done, down to the minute detail, or offers a particular instruction for action.

And yes, I realize that I am saying this to a congregation made up in no small measure of engineers and science-minded people who live their lives in concrete and specific instructions.

But more regularly, even in our stories, God's calling is less of an instruction and more of an invitation. And while there are any number of examples we could turn to from our Scriptures, one encounter which most exemplifies this is the one we have this morning from John's gospel. It also happens to be one of my favorites.

We begin with John's recounting of Jesus' baptism, which we proclaimed last week from Matthew's gospel. And in John's gospel, there is a bit more exclamation on the part of John the Baptist to point Jesus out to the crowds and say, "there he is! He's the one I've been telling you about! Follow him!" In response to this, two of John's own followers approach Jesus, and are asked by him, "what are you looking for?"

Now, here we see the first aspect of the invitation of God. Jesus does not respond to them first by affirming or deflecting the proclamation of John the Baptist. Jesus does not tell them everything about who they are or what they are to do or what they will find. Jesus does not lay out a plan, he simply invites them to share with him what they hope to find. Perhaps uncertain of how to respond to such a question, these two as-yet-unnamed individuals simply ask, "where are you staying?"

Again, Jesus could respond with specifics, that he is staying in a tent over on that hill, or staying with friends, or that the Son of Man has no place to lay his head. Instead, Jesus offers the second invitation, "Come and see."

"Come and see." The invitation is, simply and profoundly, to follow, and in following, to discover the fullness of what you weren't even sure you were looking for in the first place. Not only that, but to live into the fullness of God's calling which we might not even be able to imagine of our own, but which can be glimpsed from the prophet Isaiah.

This invitation is to do and be more than any of us might envision we could be. Through Isaiah, God declares that "it is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel;" - as if that was no minor thing to begin with! Instead, God declares, "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth."

The invitation of the calling that we have received, which each of you has heard at some point in your life and which has brought you here, is an invitation to participate in the salvation of God reaching the ends of the earth.

How did you first know and recognize that you were called by God? Perhaps you're still seeking that recognition, striving each day to open yourself up to God's voice. Perhaps it hasn't consciously crossed your mind, but again, you are here nonetheless, open to God's Word and calling. And while it may not come with direct or explicit instructions, it does come with certainty.

On that rainy February afternoon almost thirty years ago, I can't tell you what I heard. I can no longer even recall the thoughts of my mind or the prayer of my heart, save that I was placing myself in a position and a posture to listen for God. All I can remember, all I can share with you now, is that during that time the concept of ordained ministry came to my awareness, and with it a sense of calm certitude. There was no blinding light, no burning bush, no voice from heaven, no tablets or instruction manual. But there was the calm conviction that this was now the path before me, if I were to accept it. I came down from that hill with the joyous understanding that there really was no other path for me, and I have continued to discover that invitation lived out each day since. An invitation, waiting for me to say 'yes.' And in that 'yes,' a desire to share my own story and invite you to share yours.

If I had been told at the outset all that I must do, or all that I must experience and accomplish...if I had been given a list of tasks and benchmarks to achieve, I likely would have never been able to take the first step. But instead, I was given an invitation to follow, open to where the Spirit might lead in each new day. "Come and see." You, also, are given the invitation, "come and see." And together, as a people of faith and a community of worship, we are able to follow. I can't wait to see where God leads us next. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*