

When God Calls

John 1.43-51

January 18, 2009

“First you leap, then you grow wings.”
- William Sloan Coffin

The Reading

43 The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.’ ⁴⁶Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’ ⁴⁷When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, ‘Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!’ ⁴⁸Nathanael asked him, ‘Where did you come to know me?’ Jesus answered, ‘I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.’ ⁴⁹Nathanael replied, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’ ⁵⁰Jesus answered, ‘Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.’ ⁵¹And he said to him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.’

That First Step

A wise man once stood outside his front door, gazing on the walkway that led to the street. “You have to be careful,” he thought as this mundane scene gave way to inspired vision, “about stepping out your door, because that path represents a river that will sweep you away to places yet unknown or undreamt.” I believe that the same could be said of the spiritual life. Should you take that first step on the way of faith, you may well be swept away to places or circumstances beyond your wildest dreams. Please note, however, that no one has yet been swept away who did not take that first step.

I would like to reflect this morning on what it means to take that first step; or, otherwise stated, what it means to respond to God’s call. I invite you as always to begin this time together in prayer, but today I do so with some apprehension because of a story I heard last week. It’s the story of a pastor whose six year old daughter came up to him and said “Daddy, every week when you stand up to preach, you always bow your head for just a minute. Why do you do that?” “Oh, honey,” he said, beaming with pride at his precocious daughter, “I pray that God will help me

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deliver a good sermon.” “Oh, Daddy,” she lamented, “Why doesn’t God answer you?” Despite my apprehension, I invite you to pray.

Gracious One, I don’t pray to deliver a good sermon this morning. Instead, I pray that my words will give way to your own; that they will become wings on which your living, creative Word can soar into our hearts and our lives. I pray these things in the name of the living Christ; the living, creative Word of God. Amen.

One Call, Many Responses

God’s call to discipleship is always a significant event. Some of the most profound stories in the Bible, in fact, concern the call of God and the response it invites. Think, for example, of the call of Abraham that began his faith journey; the call of Moses; Isaiah’s wonderful call experience “In the year that King Uzziah died”; Ezekiel’s conversation with God in the valley of the dry bones; and of course, in today’s readings, the still, small voice of God calling to the child Samuel, and Jesus calling his disciples.

These are all wonderful stories; significant moments in the history of our faith; moments that should have an impact on our own experience. But herein lies a problem; we tend to idealize these stories; we stand in awe of their powerful testimonies to faith, but precisely because of this we don’t see any connection with our lives. How could we live up to the experience of such spiritual giants? To think that we can respond to God the same way they did – Abraham, Isaiah, or Ezekiel - it seems almost disrespectful to think of, doesn’t it? When we hold these classic experiences at such a distance from our lives, however, we forget two things, two very important things that can change the way we think about call and response.

In making such a clear distinction between their call and ours, firstly, we forget that God issues only one call. One call for you, for me, for the giants of biblical faith, for everyone; God’s call is ever and always the same. Secondly, when we distinguish between their call and ours, we forget that Abraham and Moses and Samuel, that Peter and James and John were people like you and I. They were challenged to respond to God’s call without advance warning, without preparation, without a clear understanding of what that call would entail, and with perhaps just enough spiritual courage to get them through the day. And, like us, they had to live their faith one day at a time; not just the exciting times when faith came easily; they also lived their faith through mistakes made along the way, waning courage, and even disillusionment. They lived their faith like you and I, and their collective experience provides a model of what it means to respond when God calls.

Let's examine these points more closely. It may sound strange to assert that God has one and only one call; but I believe this to be true down to the marrow of my bones. God asks for one thing and one thing only; you. Not a part of you, not the best part of you, not your strengths, not you on a good day; God wants you. That's your call from God; period, end of story. Say yes, God pleads, say yes. Be mine, accept my love. It's important to note that how you give expression to the life given over to God is a different question altogether. God asks you to give yourself in response to the divine call, and yearns to partner with you in deciding the best way to live out that commitment. For some it might mean ordination to Christian ministry, for others it might mean involvement with service organizations, for others still it might mean living faith throughout a career as a doctor, lawyer, househusband, plumber, or even a politician. The point is this; God doesn't predetermine your vocation as a Christian; rather, God helps you discover the most effective way to use your gifts, skills, personality, and possessions. God helps you discover the most effective way to share and live the good news of the gospel.

Note as well, please, that this vocation can change. I am a pastor; I can say that with the utmost confidence and conviction. Twenty years ago, however, you couldn't get me within a country mile of the pastoral ministry. What changed? God has accompanied me through the years, working with me, expanding my horizons, shaping my perspectives, and seasoning me through experience; in short, helping me in my freedom to recognize my gifts and to discover how best to share them with others.

To be honest, I struggled with this notion of call and response when I was younger. I was raised to believe that God would tell me precisely who I was to be, what I was to do, and where I was to go; but, like Samuel, I didn't hear that call. The only call I have ever heard from God is as simple as it is all consuming; be mine. The faith journey that began with my first meager response has been from beginning to end a partnership with God in which I have discovered how I can most effectively express my faith and share it with others.

The same is true for you. God says to you – as God said to Abraham or Moses; or as Jesus said to his disciples – be mine. Say, yes; let me love you, nourish you, and help you find your way through life; living your life fully, and discovering the most effective ways to use your unique gifts in your unique situation. God's call to discipleship is as simple as it is all inclusive; be mine.

Faith; a Journey into Uncharted Territory

It's safe to say that the way of faith is not charmed; its steps don't reveal themselves with clarity and certainty. We tend to attribute such a faith experience to the biblical giants, but their way was no more charmed than yours or mine. Take Peter for example. We like to think that with his response to Jesus he became "the Rock" on which Jesus would build his church. In honesty, the distance between Simon the Galilean fisherman and Peter the Apostle was great; and Peter's faith developed through both pain and failure. Along the way he misunderstood the life and ministry of Jesus; and he denied and abandoned to death the one whose life he had sworn to defend. Nevertheless his life, like the lives of other biblical giants, provides a model on which we can pattern our journey; lessons in faith from which we can learn. The first insight we can glean from their model seems at first glance a no brainer; get moving.

Conventional wisdom holds that to make a journey of a thousand miles, you have to take the first step; and this is no less true of faith. Sometimes, however, we hesitate to take that step – to begin that journey - because paralyzed by fear, intimidation, or a sense of inferiority. What do I have to offer God? we ask ourselves. What strengths do I have? I'm not worthy. But God doesn't ask us to be worthy – good thing! – and God doesn't need our strengths. God calls us to follow; take that first step; begin the journey. The rest can be worked out along the way. God doesn't call us when our gifts are finely tuned; God doesn't call us when we have matured in our understanding of faith; God doesn't call us after we have gained experience in the faith community; and, to be sure, God doesn't call us when we have identified the route and the destination. God calls us to follow; to *get moving*.

Faith is a journey and we don't always know where it will lead. It can lead us most anywhere. No one can divine where God will lead; but that's OK. We are asked simply to follow, and to listen for the Spirit as we go. Will there be mistakes along the way? Will there be wrong turns and detours? Yes, absolutely. If you don't believe it, look at Abraham or Peter. The latter displayed a cowardice unparalleled in human history when he denied his Jesus; nevertheless God was able to use even his weakness to mold and shape the man he was to become.

The most important thing is to get moving; follow God even though you don't feel worthy, even though you don't think you have anything to offer, even though you don't really know where your journey will lead. Get moving, because faith is a journey. It allows for mistakes, but it also provides companionship, comfort, and support along the way through the community into which we are called. *Called to community*; this is the second insight we can glean from the biblical model of

faith. God's call always issues in community, mutuality. Clearly, Jesus envisioned his disciples as a community; and later they became the nucleus of an even larger community. They did not experience God in Christ in a vacuum; rather, they shared that experience within the community of faith. This is the way faith is lived, supported, nourished, and matured ...in community; in a fabric of faith woven of our lives. This was true for the disciples, and it is true for us as well. Faith is given expression within community. This is the identity, nature, and role of the Overland Park Christian Church, to provide community in which you and I – and others not yet named - can find nurture, support, fellowship, service, and love. The spiritual life is nothing if not *movement* in faith; and that faith is always expressed in the *mutuality* of community.

Finally, the time will come when your faith journey will require courage; this is the third insight we can glean from the biblical model of faith. Faith will require you to make difficult decisions. It will require you to make some form of personal sacrifice for the sake of others. This courage of faith is called *mitzvah* by Rabbi Brad Hirschfield.¹ We Gentiles have sometimes heard this word, *mitzvah*, referred to as acts of kindness. It could be roughly translated into what we would call random acts of love or compassion; or a Good Samaritan attitude, doing something good for a neighbor. Rabbi Hirschfield argues, however, that this is not the heart of its meaning. At its heart *mitzvah* is a personal quality; the ability to exhibit courage and conviction, and the ability to say to God, Here I am; just like Abraham or Isaiah. *Mitzvah* empowers us to get moving in faith. *Mitzvah* empowers us to say yes to God, and *mitzvah* empowers us to reach out to others along the way, even as they reach out to us.

Faith requires *movement*, getting started on the way of faith; taking the first step on the journey of a lifetime. Faith requires *mutuality* or community; because faith is lived, nurtured, matured, and best given expression in community. And faith requires *mitzvah*, the courage to be molded and used by God in the service of love and justice. Rabbi Hirschfield summarizes the biblical model of faith in these three M's: movement, mutuality, and *mitzvah*. And they can be ours today, if only we will heed the sage advice of William Sloan Coffin that graces our bulletin today, "First you leap, then you grow wings." Amen.

¹ In a book entitled *You Don't Have to Be Wrong for Me to Be Right*.