

When God Calls

John 1.43-51

January 1, 2012

“First you leap, then you grow wings.”

- William Sloan Coffin

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip 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.’ Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’ When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, ‘Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!’ Nathanael asked him, ‘Where did you come to know me?’ Jesus answered, ‘I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.’ Nathanael replied, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’ Jesus answered, ‘Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.’ And 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.’

As I contemplated this morning’s worship gathering on this first day of the New Year, I thought it would be a good idea for us to get back to basics, to start at the very beginning, as it were, and renew our acquaintance with the foundations of faith on which we stand. So I decided to preach today on our response to God’s call. How does one respond to God’s call? That’s the question I want to address today. We could talk ‘til the cows come home about the nature of God’s call from a theological perspective, but that’s not the approach I want to take. This is because God’s call is first and foremost a call to action – *Follow me* Jesus said – so it seems logical to examine the steps involved in doing just that; following Jesus.

When deliberating on God’s call, you and I often make the same mistake Nathanael made. That is to say, we are distracted by a search for some divine sign, some extraordinary display of sacred power to assure us that the call really is from God. Nathanael was impressed by Jesus’ seeming clairvoyance. Jesus, however, wasn’t impressed. He shrugged it off, telling Nathanael he would witness divine events that would leave that one far behind. We often do the same thing. We

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seek a sign that God's call is real; more specifically, we assume that God's call must always come amid a display of ecstatic experience or supernatural occurrences. It is God we are talking about after all.

In my estimation this attitude can be detrimental to one's spiritual wellbeing. Think about it. Most of us have never undergone an ecstatic experience; most of us have never undergone what is often called a "mountain top" experience when we are moved beyond ourselves, our world is eclipsed by a divine aura, or we find ourselves peering through the veil of humanity that usually shields our everyday lives from God. The danger here, of course, is doubting that God has called us at all; assuming that we have been left by the wayside because we have not experienced divine signs and wonders.

This understanding of the divine call is reinforced by many of the classic call experiences reported in both Old and New Testaments. Think of Isaiah's call described as a vision of God's presence that filled the temple to overflowing, and reduced him to fear, wonder, and awe. Again, consider Jacob's dreamlike vision at Bethel of angels ascending and descending a ladder to heaven. His response was to proclaim the ground on which he stood the house of God, and that location the gateway to heaven. Finally, think of Paul's ecstatic experience on the road to Damascus. As reported in Acts, while others saw a blinding light, Paul experienced the presence of the resurrected Christ and was overwhelmed.

Such experiences notwithstanding, most of us experience God's call in less spectacular ways; most often it is the still, small voice that urges us, calls to us from deep within our spirits. We can, perhaps, learn a lesson from Mother Teresa. She teaches us through her life experience what the call of God is about. You might say, well Mother Teresa, she's a saint; she's one of those spiritual giants whose call must rank up there with an Isaiah or a Jacob in divine fireworks. In truth, however, Mother Teresa rarely felt the presence and calling of God. When she was young she felt the emotional joy and assurance of God's call; but for the better part of her ministry, through year after year, decade after decade of making God's compassion real in the lives of those outcast and abandoned with ease by Indian culture, she felt no assurance of God's presence in any way. She persevered on the basis of disciplined, dogged faith alone. She never felt anointed. She never felt supported and loved by God... but she remained in the trenches of a most demanding ministry.

Whether accompanied by divine fireworks or not, God's call is simple; follow me. It may be emotionally intense, it may be a still small voice, or it may feel like a barren wasteland as in Mother Teresa's case. But it is the same call. This, in my estimation, is one of the most significant aspects of God's call. God issues but one call. It doesn't matter if we're talking about Jacob, Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Mother Teresa, Paul, or you. God issues only one call – follow me - and God wants you. This call can be heard in various ways: let me love you, be mine, give yourself to me; but it all means the same thing; follow me.

This may strike you as too good to be true, if not overly simplistic. But we must note that God doesn't invite us to follow half-heartedly or part-time; he invites us to throw everything we are and have into the journey and follow him; period, end of story. And God doesn't invite us to give a portion of ourselves to him, but invites us to give all that we are, all that we have, and all that we are capable of doing to God to live out his vision in our life.

A second significant aspect of responding to God's call is this; it doesn't always come with a detailed road map; God doesn't necessarily dictate how you will use your gifts in walking the way of faith. It would be nice – or at least easier – if God's call came with an assignment: you're going to be a doctor, you're going to be a lawyer, and you're going to be an Indian chief. Quite the contrary, I am convinced that God wants to partner with us in discerning how best to use the gifts we have. Whatever your gifts, whatever you can share with other people, however you can best make a contribution to the life of your family, your faith community, and the larger community; that's your call; that's the most effective way for you to respond to the simple call; follow me. It ain't rocket science, folks, and it's not mysterious; in fact, it's very practical. Give yourself to God, period, end of story; nothing held back, nothing left over. Discover your gifts and use those gifts for God.

There is but one call for all of us, one partnership in which to discern and use our gifts; so when God calls that's how we respond; we follow. There are three additional aspects of the response to God's call that should be mentioned. The first stems from the way Jesus expresses his invitation to Nathanael; follow me. Notice that Jesus didn't invite Nathanael to affirm belief in a creed; he said follow me. He didn't make sure Nathanael's notion of God matched his own before he invited him to follow; he said follow me. You see, Jesus was on a journey. It may have looked

like a simple journey from Galilee to Judea, from Nazareth to Jerusalem, but it was in truth a journey to God. And Jesus invited Nathanael to follow; not to believe *about* faith but to live faith.

It's much easier to base our faith on what we believe *about* God. But truth be known, none of us believe exactly the same thing about God, and none of us possess the definitive notion of God. In fact, if we sat down and sketched all our ideas of what God is like, we'd all be equally wrong in some regards, we'd all be equally right in some regards, and God would ever be different and more than all of them together. String together the best and most profound statements about God and God's nature, and you will not say nearly enough or that which is most important. God will always be more than any idea we can entertain. So why should we measure our faith by what we believe *about* God, when all God wants us to do is follow him. Live faith; let the love of God shine through your life.

Response to God's call requires movement; we must get off our duff and follow Jesus on the way. Secondly, we must recognize that when we follow Jesus, we follow in community; we walk hand in hand with other disciples. Faith is never about me and God, faith is always about us; God, you, and me. I've said so many times that I should almost apologize for it that God's love is never content to rest in my heart alone, it's always going to spill over, it's always going to shine through, it's always going to move beyond, it's always going to bring me into relationship with other people. No one can live the Christian life in isolation; you've got to have people around you: people who touch you, people whose lives you touch, people used by God to transform your life and bring healing and wholeness, people with whom you can share, people on whom you can depend, people with whom you can discuss various aspects of faith so that we can better understand and better live out that faith.

In a phrase, we need each other. Our lives are intertwined whether we want them to be or not. We may not always like each other. We may sometimes disagree about this, that, or the other; but we're still part of the same family. We're still part of a community of faith, and it's only within that community that we can live our faith.

Our response to God's call can only be lived out by following, and by living in community; and all of this requires, thirdly, a certain amount of courage, a certain amount of conviction. One writer refers to this courage as *mitzvah*; a Hebrew term usually understood as good works. At its root, however, it refers to something deeper and more profound, the courage and conviction of

faith, the integrity and willingness to stand for faith's convictions ...and this is the bottom line for us. This is what allows us to respond to God's call; it's the courage and conviction to take that first step, and to follow it with a lifelong journey. You know the old expression that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. It's true, cliché though it may be. Everyone's faith begins somewhere; everyone's faith begins with that first step, no matter how small, no matter how tentative, but only when we find the courage to take that first step can the rest follow.

My friends, as you know so very well, the journey of faith is an exciting journey, but we live it one day at a time, one expression of love at a time, one act of obedience, of love, of compassion at a time; so if you're lacking a new year's resolution, may I suggest you find the courage to step out in faith, and live out the year ahead with spiritual depth, faithfulness, and mutuality in the community of faith. Respond to God and simply follow – take that first step - and your year will be marked by spiritual growth, your relationships marked by God's blessings, and our larger community touched in many ways by the grace and compassion of God. 2012 can be the year we live out our faith with courage and conviction, but it will begin with just one step. Let's take that step today.