

When God Calls

Luke 5:1-11

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Two avid fishermen went on a fishing trip. They rented all the equipment: the reels, the rods, the wading suits, the rowboat, the SUV, and even a cabin in the woods. They had spent a fortune even before they had wet a hook.

The first day they went fishing, but they didn't catch anything. The same thing happened on the second day, and on the third day. It went on like this until finally, on the last day of their vacation, one of the men caught a fish.

As they were driving home they were extremely discouraged about their fishing trip. One guy turned to the other and said, "Do you realize that this one lousy fish we caught cost us two thousand dollars?"

The other guy said, "Wow! It's a good thing we didn't catch any more!"

It makes me wonder—When Peter first set out on his fishing trip, do you think he had any idea of what it would end up costing him? Do you think Peter left his home to go fishing that fateful day with any thought that he would leave everything behind and lay down his nets so he could pick up his cross?

You never know, do you? You never know what might happen when God calls in your life. It's fascinating to hear how people's lives have changed when they've heard and heeded the call of God. Every encounter with God is unique, but there are also a lot of similarities. This morning's scripture lessons both contain stories of people being called by God. And in those stories, though each is unique to the person and situation, there are also some similar patterns we can look for in our own lives, to raise an awareness of those times when God calls us to follow him.

One of the things that you'll find in those stories of when God calls, is that most of the time people are simply living ordinary lives. It's like that throughout the Bible. Moses was a shepherd watching his sheep when he came across the burning bush. Noah was simply minding his own business when he heard God say, "Noah, I want you to build an ark..." Isaiah was in mourning at the loss of King Uzziah when he had his vision of the glory of God filling the Temple. And Peter was just finishing up a fruitless night of fishing. There was no special conjuring of the presence of God, no hocus-pocus. It was simply in the midst of ordinary life that the Lord made himself known among his people.

How many of us live our lives every day without giving a second thought to the presence of God among the ordinary? How many of us fail to see purpose and meaning in the everyday, ordinary events, because we can't see the hand of God at work?

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote:

Earth's crammed with heaven

*And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees takes off his shoes,
The rest sit around it and pluck blackberries.¹*

You don't have to look for the spectacular or the fantastic in order to know that God is present; just look around you and marvel at the hand of God in the ordinary—then everywhere we stand will be holy ground.

You don't have to look for the spectacular or the fantastic, but when you do encounter God, it may very well take your breath away. When God calls you will find both an awareness of the holiness and majesty of God, and at the same time you will become aware of how far you fall short of the glory of God in your own life. It happened to both Isaiah and Peter. Isaiah beheld God "sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe filled the temple."² It was an awesome sight to behold. Peter came to the realization that he was in the presence of One who was wholly other, and he fell to his knees. He was in awe at the mystery that confronted him in the boat.

Something happens when we find ourselves in the presence of true greatness, of someone more pure and good than we are. We are humbled. We are transformed.

In 1970, Malcolm Muggeridge went to Calcutta to do a special documentary on Mother Teresa for the BBC-TV. At the time, Muggeridge was the Walter Cronkite of British broadcasting.

The first time Muggeridge met Mother Teresa, she was working out in the streets with sick and poor people in a ghetto the likes of which he had never seen before, amid stench, filth, garbage, disease, and poverty that defied imagination. But what struck Muggeridge more than anything else, even there in that squalor, was the deep, warm glow on Mother Teresa's face and the deep, warm love in her eyes.

He began his interview with a simple question. "Do you do this every day?"

"Oh, yes," she replied, "it is my mission. It is how I serve and love my Lord."

"How long have you been doing this? How many months?"

"Months?" said Mother Teresa. "Not months, but years. Maybe eighteen years."

"Eighteen years!" exclaimed Muggeridge. "You've been working here in these streets for eighteen years?"

"Yes," she said simply and yet joyfully. "It is my privilege to be here. These are my people. These are the ones my Lord has given me to love."

"Do you ever get tired? Do you ever feel like quitting and letting someone else take over your ministry? After all, you are beginning to get older."

"Oh, no," she replied, "this is where the Lord wants me, and this is where I am happy to be. I feel young when I am here. The Lord is so good to me. How privileged I am to serve him."

Later on, Malcolm Muggeridge was heard to say, "I will never forget that little lady as long as I live. The face, the glow, the eyes, the love—it was all so pure and so beautiful. I shall never forget it. It was like

¹ ibid

² Isaiah 6:1

being in the presence of an angel. It changed my life. I have not been the same person since. It is more than I can describe.”³

Something happens when we find ourselves in the presence of holiness. Not only do we become aware of the purity and holiness in the other, but we also recognize our own shortcomings. When God calls, God comes to us and takes our breath away with his majesty and glory, and the purity of his love and compassion.

And we can't help but recoil, not at God's glory and holiness, but at the fact that our own sinfulness and failure to live into what we have been created to be has become painfully evident to us. “Woe is me,” said Isaiah. “For I am a sinner, and I live in a world of sinners, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.”⁴ When Peter realized who it was who was with him in the boat, he cried out, “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.”⁵ (Truth be told, I think most serious fishermen would've reacted differently, more along the lines of, “Say, Jesus, would you mind meeting me here tomorrow?”)

When we encounter the holiness of God, God's holiness also reveals our own failure to be what we were created to be. We become aware of our own sinfulness and our need to be saved from our sin. That's why in the Presbyterian tradition we begin worship with praise and doxology and awe and wonder at the majesty of God; but we immediately follow our praise and wonder with our confession of sin, because awe and reverence also result in humility. And it is humility that enables us to seek grace and mercy.

And the Lord meets us in our sinfulness. Note that God didn't reject Isaiah; instead, God cleansed Isaiah of his sin and took his guilt away. Note that Jesus didn't depart from Peter. Instead, Jesus told Peter not to be afraid, that he had a job for Peter to do. When God calls, it is a call to follow. When God calls, it is an invitation, not a rejection.

You see, God has something for us to do. God takes us as we are, and God uses us in spite of ourselves. Look at what God managed to do with a nomad named Abraham. Look at what God managed to do with a shepherd named Moses. Look at what God managed to do with a charismatic but flawed young man named David. When God calls, it is because God has a purpose in mind for you and for me. It doesn't matter whether or not you feel qualified to do what God has called you to do, or to be what God has in mind for you to be, because God doesn't call the qualified—he qualifies the called.

I remember a couple of years ago when Stephen Curry took the Davidson Wildcats basketball team to the elite eight in the NCAA basketball tournament. It was a Cinderella story for my tiny alma mater. Stephen was probably the best shooter in college basketball that year. On his shoes, Stephen had written the words, “I can do all things.” People who didn't know him thought he was arrogant for putting something like that on his shoes. But the story behind those words is the faith that Stephen Curry has in Christ. For the larger quote is actually “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”, from Philippians 4:13. You see, Stephen Curry understands that any greatness he possesses is not of own; it is a gift from God. Curry understands that he is able to do the things he does, and to be the kind of person he is, because the Lord has called him and is at work within him.

³ The story of Malcolm Muggeridge's encounter with Mother Teresa is told in many places. It is an example of how pure humility and unconditional love for God and neighbor is a powerful witness to the gospel of Christ's love. This particular version of the story was taken from <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/4746.htm>

⁴ Isaiah 6:5

⁵ Luke 5:8

When God calls, it is because God has a purpose for us. And God won't call you or me without giving us the means to do what he calls us to do or to be what he calls us to be.

Finally, when God calls, you will need to respond. Isaiah heard God asking, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"⁶ And what was Isaiah's response? "Here am I. Send me!"⁷ Jesus said to Peter, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people."⁸ And how did Peter respond? He and the others with him "left everything and followed [Jesus]."⁹

You see, when God calls, you have to respond. Either you'll say yes, or you'll say no. But here's the catch: when you say yes, you do so not knowing any specifics. You simply say yes because you trust the One who calls. Isaiah didn't know that God was asking him to go and criticize the people of Israel. Neither did Peter suspect that he would be dropping his nets to take up his cross. Both simply accepted the call, not on the basis of what they were going to do, but on the basis of the character of the One who was calling them.

But in the end, isn't that enough?

When God calls, what will you do? How will you respond?

⁶ Isaiah 6:8

⁷ Isaiah 6:8

⁸ Luke 5:10

⁹ Luke 5:11