

On Discerning God's Call

Isaiah 6:1-13

Luke 5:1-11

“Then Jesus said to Simon, ‘Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.’ When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.”

A friend of mine, actually a brother in all respects except blood, just announced on Facebook that he is leaving his position as senior vice president of a seminary in New York City after seventeen years in order to begin what he calls “the next adventure.” Specifically, Macky is leaving Auburn Seminary to make a documentary. Like his last five, no doubt this new film will give all who see it a glimpse of God’s reign as well as a kick in the pants when it comes to helping God make human life human. I mention Macky this morning because I bet if you asked him why he is doing this, he will say something about being faithful to his sense of God’s call. Mind you, this is the same God who called Macky into ministry a few decades ago, even though the church discerned his call to be invalid because he was gay. This would also be the God who made a way where there was no way, using Macky’s gifts outside the office of ordained ministry to bear witness to the gospel more powerfully and pointedly than had he been called to a pulpit.

Of all the voices in the world calling you to be this or do that with your life, how in the world do you discern God’s call? While the question often involves God’s call of a person into ministry or the church’s call of a person into service (just ask the Pastor Nominating Committee), biblically God’s call has less to do with the job you get paid for and everything to do with the witness you were born to bear. A teacher of preachers named Paul Scherer once said that the joy of living in response to God’s call comes from “trusting God in the presence of some great darkness and waiting for the light to dawn.... [It comes from] embodying, at least in a broken and fragmentary way, the purposes of the eternal God in the ordinary events of our sometimes ordinary lives.”

Still I wonder exactly how you and I discern God’s light in the darkness as opposed to the light of our own bliss or a passing phase or indigestion. In a sense, all voices are gods (with a small g and no apostrophe) demanding obeisance. Therefore to help us in our discernment, the church proclaims, week in and week out, that the only God who has come to accompany you through the valley of the shadow, the Voice that really knows your name, the Light that the darkness has not overcome is the God “who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” As we ask the Spirit to intercede between our lives and the words on these pages, as we listen for God’s word in these words turning us toward Jesus Christ, we are given eyes to see God’s light and ears to hear God’s voice calling us to follow him in the ordinary events of our sometimes ordinary lives. So every time you *think* a voice in the world is calling your name or a light in your mind is dawning, before you drop everything and follow where it wants to lead you, ask yourself: *Is this the God* I know in Jesus Christ? *Is this light* the light I see in his face? *Is this voice* the voice I hear mediated in the words of Scripture?

If the answer to those questions is “yes,” your response to what you see and hear may be as dramatic as the disciples who dropped everything and hit the road with Jesus. Or your response may be as subtle as taking the first halting step on a rocky, uphill road that the light illumines, your loved ones by your side. To help us notice our own responses, Luke’s stories after Jesus’ birth are stories about people’s response to the manifestation, the epiphany of God’s light in him, in the ordinary events of their ordinary lives. I think first of the shepherds abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night. The glory, the light of God shone round about them and their first response was a mixture of surprise and fear and awe. Then there is the story of Simeon and Anna, two characters who had spent their long lives actively waiting for the light, and who respond with joy and gratitude. The teachers in the temple were amazed, even perplexed. John the Baptist was humbled. The devil challenged the light. The congregation was filled with rage at the light and tried to drive it out of town. The demon was threatened while the bystanders were dumbfounded. The sick were drawn to the light.

Luke's characters embody the range of our responses to God's light shining through the words of Scripture. We are afraid, joyful, grateful, amazed, perplexed, humbled, challenged, angered, threatened, dumbfounded, and, at our most vulnerable, drawn to the light of God's love as it shines upon the ordinary events of our ordinary lives. For the most part, Luke's characters embody the responses of individuals except, I think, in the story before us today. Here the main character is Peter (the rock on whom Jesus says he will build the church) and the location is a boat (often a symbol for the church) and the writer is Luke (who has in mind, always, the witness of the early church). Today I think Luke is telling us a story not about our discerning God's call as individuals, but about the church hearing and obeying God's voice. It is a story about how this congregation might discern God's call for such a time as this as you ready yourselves for the person God is calling to be your next minister.

According to Luke, the voice calling the church is God's when that voice commands you to keep a little distance from the place where you have settled in. Jesus gets in the boat and tells Peter to put out a little way from the shore. So many voices in congregations want the church to stay put, but God in Christ calls God's people out to where they just might begin again to trust God more than the predictable ground beneath their feet.

In the second place, the voice calling the church is God's if listening to that voice leads you to grow in faith and understanding. Once in the boat, Jesus sits down and teaches them how to listen for God's word in the law and the prophets through the interpretive lens of his love. He has not come to introduce a new program or show them the latest technique for institutional growth. He who *is* God's word teaches the church God's word, (a good preacher called by God will do the same!) so that the church more and more may bear witness to *that* word, and not another, in the world.

In the third place, God in Christ calls the church to go deep. When Jesus tells Simon to put out into the deep and let down his nets he means, in effect, if you are going to catch people-- literally translated, if you are going to rescue people from the peril and power of death--if you want to be witnesses to the good news of love's triumph, then you must go deep. Not only is that where people most in need of God's love dwell, but the substance of the church's faith also cannot be grasped except as each generation dares the depths. Plenty of voices out there are available to those who prefer the shallows or who want to be entertained. Even so, most every church can be counted on to respond to Jesus' command as Simon first responded: We have done that already and it did not work. Nevertheless, Jesus says, "Put out into the deep" if it is God's call the church means to obey.

In the fourth place, when the early church obeyed God's call, the response was overwhelming. In Luke's story, more hands and boats were needed to bring those caught in the net on board the boat. Surely Luke was thinking of the response of the Gentiles to the gospel, a response that threatened to sink the boat built to hold only Jewish Christians. The point, it seems to me, is that when God calls the church, God calls all hands on deck to gather in a radically inclusive community, so that none in the net will be lost to the ship of faith or excluded from the body of Christ.

In the fifth place, when Simon, now called Simon Peter, sees the miraculous catch, he falls at Jesus' knees and tells Jesus to go away from him for he is a sinful man, as we all are sinful. Who else is there for God to call? In response, Jesus says, "Do not be afraid," and then gives the church its mission. The church that hears God's call bows down in humility before Jesus and worships. Then one way or another, before he sends us out, Jesus says, "Do not be afraid." In a world full of death-dealing voices trying to make us afraid, God calls the church and sends it out to rescue people from the power of death.

Then Luke's final insight for a church in the midst of discerning God's call is especially for the Pastor Nominating Committee: "Jesus did not show up after a good night's sleep and a hearty breakfast," Episcopal Dean Peter Eaton notices. "He came to find these men at the end of a long working day, after back-breaking labor, and told them to keep working." At the end of many a long working day, know that the eleven who were called by God and elected by the voice of this congregation continue the work of discerning the one whom God will call to lead this ship filled with disciples who have left everything to follow Jesus. We are grateful. Thanks be to God.