

Continuously Called

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,
Settle our hearts.
Still our minds.
And stir our imaginations,
That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

John 1:35-42

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.

When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother.

He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

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If you were here last week, you heard Kristin preach about Jesus' baptism as the first movement in the great musical of Jesus' life. If the incarnation and Jesus' birth were the opening number, as Kristin described them, then Jesus' baptism is when the lights shift, the tempo changes, and the story truly begins to move. Baptism, as a sign of our belovedness in God's eyes, is the beginning not only in Jesus' life, but in our own as well. And that's true regardless of whether or not we've even been baptized. And baptism is a great place to begin—a firm foundation. Unfortunately, it's also where many people stop.

But if baptism is just the beginning, it begs the question, what comes next?

For Jesus, the next act involves being called by the Spirit into the wilderness. And while we save that story for the beginning of Lent, the lectionary points us toward other stories that explore the same question: what does it mean to be called?

Call stories are a dime a dozen in scripture, but we don't talk about call much in our world. If you want to become a pastor, you'll need a call story, but otherwise, calls are quickly becoming just an outdated mode of communication (why call when you can text?). Scripture, however, suggests something different. It tells the stories of all kinds of people being called, in all kinds of ways, to all kinds of things. Again and again, scripture insists that being called is not reserved for the exceptional, but is a fundamental part of what it means to live a life of faith.

Consider, for example, the call of the two disciples we heard in this morning's scripture reading—two people who are not seeking a call at all, but instead stumble into one. John the Baptist is standing with two of his disciples when he sees Jesus walk by. Hearing John proclaim, "Look, here is the Lamb of God," the two disciples begin to follow Jesus. The details here matter.

The two are disciples of John's—they're not priests, not religious leaders, they're seekers, listeners, people who are lingering by the water paying attention to someone else's faith. They are two individuals who have showed up for a sermon or a service, curious about what this new prophet has to say. When they begin to follow Jesus, they do so out of curiosity. No one has told them to follow, no one has invited them or called them, they simply follow, curious to see where Jesus is going, who this "Lamb of God" might be. This is not a dramatic moment of conversion. These are two people who are responding not to Jesus directly, but to someone else's testimony. Their curiosity is second-hand, borrowed. They begin to follow because someone else pointed the way and that was enough to make them wonder.

The two disciples begin by following, and Jesus responds by turning toward them and asking: what are you looking for? And notice how they respond. Jesus asks them this deeply profound question, what are you looking for, and these two respond with, "where are you staying?" Where are you staying?!

Who cares where Jesus is staying?! You can almost picture it, can't you? The two disciples trailing Jesus when he suddenly turns and directs his full attention toward them and asks this unexpected and disarming question. You can almost hear them stutter, eyes flickering toward one another, words failing, until one of them blurts out the first thing that pops into their head, "where are you staying?" The first recorded response to Jesus' call isn't a confession of faith or a profound statement of glory, it's a question about sleeping arrangements. But Jesus does not turn away. Jesus does not dismiss them as looky-loos or curiosity seekers. He doesn't send them back to John; he simply invites them to come and see.

This moment is not unusual. Scripture is full of God calling people who seem anything but qualified. Moses is called to lead a liberation movement not unlike the Civil Rights Movement in our own country. But unlike the eloquent and well-spoken Martin Luther King Jr, Moses had a stutter, a profound aversion to the spotlight, and was wanted for murder. But God calls him anyway. The Book of Esther tells the story of Esther being called upon to save her entire people from genocide despite being an orphaned girl from a marginalized people. Abraham and Sarah are called to be the ancestors of an entire people despite being too old to have children and

repeatedly getting things wrong. Or consider the Samaritan woman at the well. We are never told her name, only that she has a checkered past and is socially marginalized. She doesn't seek Jesus out, but instead is met by him while drawing water from the well. And yet, after a single conversation, she becomes the woman who brings her whole town to come and see. In every one of these stories, call begins not with clarity or confidence, but with encounter—with a God who turns toward ordinary people and meets them in the midst of half-formed faith and unfinished lives.

And when God meets them, God calls, God invites. And scripture is clear—those calls are not all the same. We only need to look at our passage for this morning for that to become clear. For Andrew and the other disciple, the call isn't heroic action or major life-changes, at least, not at first. Instead it is an invitation to come and see. Because sometimes what we are called to do is to come and see, to see and stay, to stay and spend time. Sometimes our call isn't heroic or adventurous, it's quiet and faithful.

And sometimes it is anonymous. One of the two disciples who responds to this invitation is never named, never mentioned again. Scripture doesn't tell us what they go on to do—only that they came, and saw, and stayed. The other disciple, Andrew, hears the same invitation but his call is different. Andrew goes first to find his brother. His call is to tell someone he loves what he has experienced. And notice—Jesus never tells Andrew to do this. There is no command, no instruction. Andrew simply goes. Sometimes what we are called to do comes not as a word we hear, but as a nudge we feel—an urge to share, to invite, to bring someone else along. And then there is Simon. Simon, who is called not to act, at least not yet, but to become: "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas," Jesus says. Before Simon does anything, before he understands what lies ahead, he is named. Sometimes what we are called to do is become: a neighbor, a caregiver, a volunteer, a friend.

It is a pattern is repeated across scripture. Some are called to go and speak, like Moses, sent back into danger with trembling hands and an unsteady voice. Some are called to act with courage, like Esther, risking her life for the sake of her people. Some are called to leave and begin again, like Abraham and Sarah, stepping into a future they cannot yet imagine. And some, like the Samaritan woman at the well, are called simply to bear witness—not with perfect theology, but with honesty, about what they have experienced. Different people. Different moments. Different calls. And different ways of hearing those calls.

The unnamed disciple hears the invitation directly from Jesus. Andrew feels an internal nudge to go and tell his brother. Simon, hears the call first through Andrew and then more clearly through Jesus. Moses notices beauty in nature and hears God's call when he pays attention. Esther hears her call through the voice of her uncle, who sees a political situation unfolding that requires action. The prophet Samuel hears God calling him in a dream. Jeremiah knows himself to have been called from birth. Zachariah is called through loss and limitation when he loses his voice for nine months. Jonah's call comes as a disruption he actively resists. Paul experiences an epiphany on the road to Damascus. Calls come in different forms, for different purposes, at different times.

What remains the same is that we are called—all of us. And we are called not once, but time and time again. Call, fortunately or unfortunately, is not a one-and-done situation. It is an ongoing relationship.

It is what it means to live a life of faith. Abraham and Sarah are called first to leave their family and go to a place God will show them. Three chapters later, God calls them again to trust in God's plan. Seven chapters after that, God calls them to let go of their understandings and plans. Moses is called at the burning bush, then again and again in the wilderness to intercede and to lead, to speak with God on the mountaintop, and eventually to step aside and allow Joshua to lead. Simon, who is called in this morning's passage to become Peter, is called to follow, and then called to fail (as he denies Jesus three times), and finally called to begin again when Jesus tells him to feed my sheep. Mary, Jesus' mother, is called to bear a child, called to ponder, called to let her child go, and finally called to watch him die.

And all of that can sound overwhelming—until we remember that because call unfolds over time, it is rarely about figuring out the rest of our lives. More often, it is about discerning the next faithful step. Again and again in the gospels, when Jesus has people's full attention—after healing, after miracles, after moments of awe—he does not give them a grand plan. He gives them something small and concrete to do. To the leper, Jesus says, "Go and show yourself to the priest." To the paralytic, "Get up, take your mat, and go home." To Jairus and his wife, after raising their daughter from the dead, Jesus tells them to give her something to eat. After raising their daughter from the dead, the thing Jesus tells them to do is go make lunch.

Sometimes we are called to do big things—to stand up for justice, to speak truth to power, to uproot our lives and move to a new place. But far more often we are called to do the next right thing—to listen for where God is nudging us to go, to pay attention to the beauty around us, to become a slightly better version of ourselves—to come and see, to see and stay, to stay and spend time. To tend the places where God has placed us. To bear witness to the events unfolding around us. To share our experiences with the people we love.

God is calling. Through the whisper of the Spirit's deepest sighs, through the thrill of sudden beauties that can catch us by surprise. God is calling. Through the voices of our neighbors' urgent prayers, through their longing for redemption and rescue from despair. In places of hurt, in faces of need. God is calling.

Will you hear?