What’s Your Call Story?

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Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 19:1-10

Our biblical texts this morning introduce us to two very different persons. One, a powerful prophet of God born in the 8th century before the Common Era, the other a local tax collector in the time of Jesus. Each is summoned by God, called by the voice of God, and each responds positively.

Isaiah has a vision of a wild and smoky room, where the Lord is seated high and mighty, on a throne. Winged seraphim and cherubim are flying around. There’s fire and noise and holy cacophony. It’s like a scene out of a Steven Spielberg movie, and it terrifies Isaiah, who suddenly feels tiny and helpless and woefully inadequate – and he says so. But one of the winged creatures flies to him and cleanses his lips with a burning coal, which emboldens him.

A little fire, some smoke, flying creatures and burning coals. Just another day at the office for an 8th century prophet of God.
When a voice booms out asking, “Who will go for us? Whom shall I send?” the suddenly brave Isaiah replies, “Here am I. Send me.”

At the other end of the call spectrum we have Zacchaeus, a wealthy little man in the town of Jericho, made rich by his tax collecting job. His neighbors don’t care much for him; he takes from them on behalf of the Romans, the occupying empire, and makes out like a thief. This is no prophet of God.

When Jesus and his entourage come to town one day, everyone wants to see the renowned teacher and healer. Because of his small stature and also, I suspect, because it kept him out of reach of his hostile neighbors, Zacchaeus climbs a sycamore tree to watch the parade.

Our Westminster travel group was in Jericho three weeks ago. Our bus did a drive-by viewing of the Greek Orthodox church built as a shrine over the old stump of the “actual tree.” There, or near there, Zacchaeus had his leafy encounter with Jesus.

It’s a more mundane call story than Isaiah’s, but it does have some drama. Imagine Jesus and a crowd coming into town, something like the Palm Sunday procession. All of a sudden Jesus stops, and all eyes are on him. Everyone else stops. He looks up. Everyone else looks up. And there, perched in the branches of that sycamore tree, sits everyone’s favorite tax collector to hate. To everyone’s surprise, Jesus calls out to Zacchaeus and tells him to hurry and come down because he’s going to stay at his home.
The crowd is shocked. The most despised man in town, the one colluding with the Romans, is the one Jesus chooses to favor?

“Why would he go to the house of a sinner?” they ask.

In the course of the visit with Jesus at his home, Zacchaeus announces he will change how he collects taxes. If he has defrauded anyone he will pay them back fourfold – and why would he say that if he had not already cheated someone? And he makes a commitment to give half of his wealth to support the poor. Zacchaeus is a transformed man. That happens when God calls, and we respond. Just ask Hannah in the older testament when God calls, she responds, and Samuel is born…or Sarah when Isaac was born or Elizabeth when John was born or Mary when Jesus is born. When God calls, wonderful, transformative things happen.

A thread runs through these two call stories. Neither Isaiah nor Zacchaeus nor those women in scripture assumed they were the ones God would choose. None expected to be summoned by God. And yet they all listened and said yes – and with that yes came a change in the direction of their lives. That happens when God calls, and we respond.

What’s your call story?

It doesn’t have to be dramatic. It doesn’t mean you have to run off to seminary because only clergy are truly called. Zacchaeus kept on collecting taxes; he just did it now with honesty and integrity.
James and John, Andrew and Simon, the fishermen summoned by Jesus, went on fishing, only this time for people – and I suspect they didn’t entirely leave their nets behind.

I grew up in a family where the description of “being called” was quite common. I suppose that’s how it should be in a Presbyterian minister’s household. Calling, or vocation, has always been important in our tradition. John Calvin, writing in 16th century Geneva, argued that God’s calling was essential for anyone wanting to find their way through life.

“The Lord bids each one of us,” Calvin wrote, “In all life’s actions to look for God’s calling.” (All quotes from Calvin are taken from his Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book III, chapter X, section 6 [Philadelphia: John Knox Press, 1960], p. 724)

Then sounding like a critic of multi-tasking, he goes on to say,

“‘For God knows with what great restlessness human nature flames, with what fickleness it is borne hither and thither, how its ambitions long to embrace various things at once. Therefore, lest everything…be turned topsy-turvy, God has appointed duties for everyone in a particular way of life.’

Sixteenth-century advice, sound advice, for a 21st century world: slow down, center yourself, find your purpose, and focus your life.
Calvin then says, “God has named these various kinds of living ‘callings.’”

*What’s your call story? What gives your life meaning?*

“Each individual,” Calvin continues,

> “Has their own kind of living assigned to them by the Lord as a sort of sentry post so that they may not heedlessly wander about through life.”

To discern our calling is to have the foundation we need to live sound and healthy lives. To find our calling means to discover our life purpose.

I was never comfortable with the thesis of Rick Warren’s book *The Purpose-Driven Life*, or his sequel, *The Purpose-Driven Church*. Our lives are meant to be fulfilled, satisfied, contented, *not driven*. That sounds competitive in a male-kind of way, and, frankly, privileged. Calvin was trying to help believers come to see that how they live vocationally can – and in the best of circumstances *will* – reflect the love and life of God. And that brings profound contentment in life, not so much victory or triumph, but, rather, gladness, and gratitude.

When we say, as we Christians do, “The peace of Christ be with you,” we mean may you find deep satisfaction and fulfillment in your life. May you find your calling in life, because then you will have found the peace of Christ.
My father spoke often of his being called to ministry. It was commonly assumed around our house that each of us was called; of the four children in our family, he would say, one was called to teach, one to practice law, one to ministry, and one to banking.

When my father reached retirement he faced a deep challenge – an existential crisis not unlike many who reach that milestone: what to “do” with one’s life now that the purpose is gone?

My dad struggled for a full year after retirement from the last church he served. He’d always had a specific calling to fulfill, to one church or another. And then that calling was gone. He wondered if his life was coming to an end because it no longer had purpose. During that first traumatic year he slowly came to understand that retirement itself could be a vocation. He discerned a “call to retire,” wrote a paper about it, and went on a mini-speaking tour to describe his discovery – all the retirees loved it. He dubbed it “the penultimate call.”

I had a conversation recently with a retired business executive. He had been invited to serve on a community board and wanted to talk about whether he should do it. In the course of the our conversation he began to speak about the board role as offering him a chance to make a difference, to focus on something that mattered. He was making the decision on the basis of direction and purpose. We didn’t use “called” language in that conversation, but that’s what we were talking about.

What’s your call story?
Most of us reflexively leave the notion of “being called” to the clergy, thinking that only they receive a summons to a vocation. We reserve the terminology for clergy; we “call” them to serve. They have terms of call. When they leave the church the congregation dissolves the call.

Unfortunately, we don’t use such language with other vocations. Why not try it? Try speaking of your job – working or retirement – with that language. If someone asks, “When did you start teaching at that school?” trying answering, “I was called there four years ago.”

“When did you start working for Target?”

“I was called there two years ago.”

“What kind of job are you looking for?”

“I feel called to a retail clothing sales position…or called to be a mail carrier…or called to be a car mechanic…or called to do social work…or called to be a doula…or called to run for public office…or called to make music… Try using that language the next chance you get, when talking about your work, your vocation, what it is you do that gives you meaning in life.

Martin Luther King referred to our calling as our blueprint for life. He used to speak with school children and explain how builders use blueprints in order to follow the architect’s design. Then King would ask the school children, “What’s your life’s blueprint?”
Yesterday more than a thousand people gathered in this room to celebrate the life of Jim Dayton, who died unexpectedly on Wednesday. An awful loss. He was a person who clearly had found his calling, his life’s blueprint, in design and architecture. We see that every time we enter the new wing he created. In his life he produced blueprints for human community. Thanks be to God for his life.

Without a blueprint we run the risk of having no direction in life. We lose our way. That’s what had happened to Isaiah. Remember when God summons him through all that smoke and noise, and he says he’s not up to it: Woe is me, for I am lost. I don’t know where I’m going. I have no direction. I have no focus. I’m lost. How could you be calling me, God?

The same thing had happened in Zacchaeus’ life, and it’s why Jesus called to him in that sycamore tree. When the people of Jericho complain about Jesus choosing to go to the home of a tax collector and, therefore, a sinner in their eyes, Jesus replies, “The Son of humankind came to seek and to save the lost.”

Zacchaeus had lost his way. Doesn’t that describe many of us on our worst, purpose-less days – as being lost?

“Wandering about heedlessly through life,” in Calvin’s terms? No sense of calling, no purpose, no focus in life?

Jesus came for people like us. And like Zacchaeus, and Hannah, and Sarah, and Isaiah, and Mary.
At the heart of the ministry of Jesus was his desire to help people find their calling – their way – our way – of serving God in life. He knew that once we find our calling, we are fulfilled, and begin to live as people transformed. We become part of the unfolding reign of God, which we are all in together.

In a moment we will baptize little Elsie Anne and Evelyn Marie. Baptism is the beginning of Christian vocation. It’s the first sign of a calling in life. It happens there, in the water. We make the promise, essentially, to help those being baptized find their purpose in life, their calling.

Calvin summed it up this way: “The Lord’s calling is in everything the beginning and foundation of well-being.”

So when God calls, let us be prepared to come down from that sycamore tree and respond by saying, “Here am I. Send me.”

Thanks be to God.

Amen.