



Called for What?

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field

The Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany. ~ February 10, 2019

Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

Psalm 138

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| 1 I will give thanks to you, O God, with my whole heart; *
before the gods I will sing your praise. | 6 They will sing of the ways of God, *
that great is the glory of God, |
| 2 I will bow down toward your holy temple
and praise your Name, *
because of your love and faithfulness; | 7 Who is on high, yet cares for the lowly, *
and perceives the haughty from afar. |
| 3 For you have glorified your Name *
and your word above all things. | 8 Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you keep me safe;
*
you stretch forth your hand
against the fury of my enemies;
your right hand shall save me. |
| 4 When I called, you answered me; *
you increased my strength within me. | 9 You will make good your purpose for me; *
O God, your love endures for ever;
do not abandon the works of your hands. |
| 5 All the rulers of the earth will praise you, O God, *
when they have heard the words of your mouth. | |

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain. For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

Luke 5:1-11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done this, they caught so

many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. 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.

There are some people who will tell you they have always known what they are supposed to be, they have a strong sense of call. I met quite a few of them in seminary—People who could pinpoint exactly when they knew they wanted to be ordained, when their call came, because it was through a dramatic vision of God, something like Isaiah's experience that we just heard. Some people said they had just known since they were children—they used to give Communion to their teddy bears. Some had terrifying stories of surviving car crashes or shootings only to know afterwards that they had survived to become ordained—their own version of the burning bush. In a way, I have envied people who had such clarity of call, such certainty. It is something with which I struggled—I was so terrified of preaching that for years I stubbornly ignored a growing pull to becoming a priest. But sadly I never had God talk to me from a bush, or any other plant, for that matter.

And while I don't doubt any of my fellow seminarians' spectacular call stories, or their experience, I do sometimes think that big dramatic call stories can cause trouble. While the good news in them is the reminder that God tends to take us apart before putting us back together (see: pretty much everyone to whom God appeared dramatically freaking out in fear) the very real downside is that they set our expectations for a call way too high. If it doesn't involve screaming seraphs and smoke, or at least a boat sinking from too big a haul of fish, it can't be from God.

I realize that talking about "call" may not be something most people spend a lot of time angsting over—it seems too churchy. Surely it only applies to those who want to be deacons or priests. But "call" put another way is the question of what am I to do with my life? What is my purpose here on earth? What gives us and our lives meaning? This is a struggle that I would guess many of us have experienced. What exactly does God want me to do, and when and how is God going to telegraph it to me?

I would guess that most of us at best half believe we are doing what God has called us to do, half believe we are living a life of purpose. Many of us seem to spend life waiting to find out what our true purpose is, or waiting until our circumstances improve and we can do a better job of fulfilling it. You know how it goes: once I get through school, once I have a little more experience at it, once I get that perfect job, once the mortgage is paid off, once I retire... And the only thing we know for sure is that, for now, in the meantime, this cannot possibly be what God had in mind.

As sad as this is, it does provide a function—it helps us avoid jumping into life with both feet. Because if this is not my real life, if it hasn't started yet, why give it my all? I can stay in the shallow end, doing the doggy paddle. If anyone asks me what I am doing, my confident response can be that I am practicing. Further it lets me dismiss who I am, discount what I do every day, because if it doesn't live up to some fantasy of what I would look like if dedicated to my true purpose.

True purpose. Deep down, I suspect, that is something we each believe we have. And for a long time the church was in the business of helping people figure out what their true purpose was. We haven't been so great at that for a while, not really any one person's fault, but somehow conquering the world under the flag of Christ, or even keeping Christ in Christmas just seem a little, well, off. Many Christian churches, faced with people trying to figure out their purpose will direct them to a committee, or invite them to sing in the choir, or to volunteer at the food cupboard. And while all of these things are good and necessary, they seem to not really address the question.

And before we all start trying to diagnose the problem, find out who is responsible, and create a committee to fix it, the truth is that discovery of purpose is not the job of any one person or committee. It is the job of the gathered community of faith. In other words, all y'all. It is the job of the called ones—and before you start looking around for those with burning embers on their lips, remember that each of you *is* called. Called to live out your identity as a child of God whether that call is as a plumber, a nurse, an executive, or a welder. I have a sneaky hunch that God is not really all that interested in how we make a living (provided the way we make a living doesn't denigrate others), that God is not wildly interested in what we do but is quite interested in how we are. Because the truth is you can be the hands and heart of God, you can be Christ for someone whether you are in high school trying to figure out which college you are going to go to or the Chair of a Department of an Ivy League University. The plain truth is you already have everything you need to respond to your divine call. You have the same thing every blessed person has; a whole life to live on this earth, tasks in it you can do well or not so well, and people in it you can lift up by your presence or pull down by your absence—even when you are standing right in front of them.

The question of call is not so much what you are doing, but who you are and how you are doing it. The question of purpose has less to do with a career choice than with what is the center of your life and to what are you giving your life. Paul was a tentmaker—and he remained one after he became an apostle. But none of us remember him for his wicked good tentmaking skills or try to emulate his tentmaking ability. We remember Paul because there is

more life in the world because of him—who he was and how he was. When each of us goes to bed at night the question of call is simply this: is there more life in this world because of us or less life because of us? The question is the same for those who have had burning embers applied to their lips as for those who have not, those who have chatted with flaming foliage, and those who have not. Our purpose, our God given purpose is the same, it is to increase the abundance of life in this world.

It is entirely possible that God does have something else in mind for you. Yet I can't help but wonder that if we won't live *this* life to the full, then why should God think up something more challenging for us? We can still leave the shallow end. We can still put out into the deep water, let down our nets for a catch, and see what happens next. Whatever it is, you can bet that you have already been caught, or you wouldn't be sitting here and listening to this. You have already been called, both to live and to magnify the abundant life of God.