

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
Seeking Life with Christ
John 1.35-42
January 15, 2023

Our New Testament reading this morning is from the opening words of the first letter to the Corinthians. St. Paul introduces himself as the writer, describes the community to which he is writing, and points all Christians to the aim and purpose of their lives. He does it by using one word over and over: *kaleo*. Calling, or chosen.

Paul is called to be an apostle. Christians in Corinth are called to be saints together with those in every place to who call on the name of the Lord. You are called into the fellowship of God's son, Jesus Christ.

Calling. This is what I want us to think about together this morning. Here, at the beginning of this year as we consider what God is calling us to this year. Here, at what may be for some of you a hinge moment or threshold moment in your life. What does it mean to be called and to respond?

Everything we might say or think about any of this begins with a claim about God. God is a God who calls. We see this all through scripture. God tells Abraham to leave his home. God stirs young Samuel to serve him. God commands and inspires men and women to faithfulness. In each case, this is described in some way or another, as a calling from God, to which people in the various situations in which they find themselves respond.

God is a God who calls which means that humans are those who respond to the call. The initiative is God's; ours is to respond. The calling is God's; the response is ours. Here we have said something really important about life: we are not alone; we are not adrift in an endless sea of peril; we are not set loose by a disinterested, uninvolved deity. We are creatures beloved by the Creator. We are dance partners who follow the lead of our dance partner. We are listeners, watchers, and seekers who respond to the prompting and direction of the one who is good and wise and loving and who creates and sustains and calls us to abundant life.

So, we begin with this: God calls and we respond. We might think of this in some ways as a basic architecture of our relationship with God. A God who calls and we respond.

God's calling can take many different shapes and come in many different ways. The calling on your life for your vocation can take many shapes and forms. Calling is not just for preachers who have been called into ministry. I imagine some of you here are actively, and perhaps anxiously, trying to decide what to do with your life and hoping that a clear call from God would penetrate your consciousness and draw you to whatever future God has for you. You're trying to figure out a career, a place to live, a path to follow. And it's not always simple. Wouldn't it be so nice if it were simple? If there came a point in life when you asked God, "What do you want

me to do with my life?" And then the answer came, "I want you to be a doctor or teacher or scientist or pastor or locksmith or farmer." And then you just went and did that thing for the rest of your life and that thing you did brought you joy and meaning and provided for you and your family. Wouldn't that be so nice if God's call came that clearly all the time? But that's not the way it works, not most of the time for most people trying to figure out what to do with their lives.

I remember trying to figure those kinds of things out. Have I told you the story about how I decided where to go to college? I think I've told this story before, but just the short version here. I decided the way to choose a school when it came down to two schools was to choose the school that won the football game in my senior year of high school. I was in attendance for the Baylor versus Texas A&M football game, praying to God, "God, I will go to whichever school wins this football game." This was 1990 before they had overtime rules, and the game ended in a tie. Look it up, I'm not making this up. Now the tie was 20 to 20, which just adds to the irony, the 2020-vision was not there.

At the end of that, I said, "Seriously? This is how you treat me when I seek your will?" I imagine some of you have had similar experiences. You place yourself into what you believe to be faithfully in God's presence, and you're simply asking God to give you clarity about something which seems like something that God should give you clarity about, and then it doesn't come. We desire a calling, but it's not always easy. You're not alone in this.

Sometimes though, we do get glimmers. I remember another time trying to figure these kinds of things out. (I think I've told this story before, but at some point, you start recycling your stories.) I was a summer intern in a chemical plant working south of Houston. One morning, it was a Tuesday, I sat up in bed at about 530 when it was time to get up and get ready to go to work. I sat up in bed and the only thought on my mind was "I wish I was going to church today. I wish I was going to church to do whatever pastors do on Tuesday." And then I thought, "what do pastors do on Tuesday?" I had no idea, but whatever it was that was what I wanted to be doing. That was clarity for me. Clarity enough.

I didn't hear an angel call my name; I saw no burning bush or bright shining light, but still, I *knew* with clarity as much as I could understand what direction my life would go from that moment. And it did.

But, here's the thing, that moment came after about four years of wrestling with this - this sense of call, this question of call, this hope for a clear call. I prayed about this. I explored various opportunities and alternatives. I studied and wondered and probably worried. Like I said, by the time I had any clarity, I was working at this chemical plant, making plastic pellets in this industrial plant, pretty much doing my part to destroy the environment, I guess. And it was then in the context of that that I knew.

I readily acknowledge not everyone is even that fortunate. Most people most of the time make the best decisions they can when the time comes to make it, to follow the path that seems

right. Frederick Buechner famously said the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. That is not a bad place to start.

This goes deeper and farther than even the task of determining a career calling. For Buechner, our task as human beings is, "to pay attention, to stop, look, and listen for what God is doing". because in Buechner's estimation "our lives have a similar plot as the Bible: God creates, we get lost, and God works to bring us and the rest of creation back to himself".

Jesus' first words in the gospel of John are, "What are you looking for?" or in some translations, "What are you seeking?" Like with everything in John's gospel, there are layers of meaning to this question being the first words Jesus says. On one level, he is speaking to two disciples who start following him. It's like he turns around and asks, "What are you looking for?" On another level, it's a question aimed at all of us who read this gospel and seek to follow Jesus. "What are you seeking?" What are you looking for? It's a question that prompts self-reflection if nothing else. All of John's gospel then will flow from this question - will be about not seeing and seeing, night and day, dark and light. The question hangs over the whole gospel. What are you looking for and would you know it if you found it?

Those are Jesus's first words in the gospel and an important word for us who would be disciples of Jesus. The first step in discipleship is to get clarity on this question, "What are you looking for?" That question may have everything to do with what major you study or what career you pursue. The work you want to do, the contribution you want to make, your intellectual curiosity, what makes your heart sing – these can all be part of the answer to what you're looking for, your deep gladness.

Yet, the question about calling is more foundational than even that. For followers of Jesus, what are you looking for can really only be ultimately answered in one way: and it's not a career, or a place to live, or financial security, or what I think will make me happy. All those can be good things, really good things, but this is a clarifying question. Jesus asks: what are you looking for? And our only ultimate answer can be: You.

I am looking for you. I am seeking you. In all that I do and all that I believe you're leading me toward, in all my missteps, which I confess, in all of the places you lead me to great gladness, the world's deep need, my hungers, my desires, in all of this, what I'm seeking is you.

I knew a pastor years ago who would often include a line in his beautiful benedictions, "Give as much of yourself as you can to as much of God as you know." I liked that. When we begin, we don't even know ourselves to give or the God to whom we give, but we know enough to hear a call and to follow. That happens to be true in most studies, in most careers, in marriage, and in our faith. But we begin hearing the question, which is also a call: What are you looking for? You, Jesus. I'm looking for You.

The disciples in John 1 give that sort of answer. "What are you looking for?" Jesus asks. "Rabbi," they answer. Embedded in their answer is a recognition of who he is to them and who they will

be to him. You are our rabbi; we are your disciples. Which means they are saying, you call, we respond. You lead, we follow. You know perfectly well, if you've read any of the gospels, they don't do this perfectly. But this is their heart's desire. We won't do this perfectly, but it can be our heart's desire.

They then ask him a question, "Where are you staying?" Which is another line loaded with meaning. "Come and see," he responds, another response loaded with meaning. That's the second line Jesus says in the gospel.

First words of Jesus: What are you looking for? Second words of Jesus: Come and see.

The whole gospel is in those two lines. The whole call and response, the whole shape of the relationship. To seek him is to follow where he says come. As Buechner says, to stop, to listen to look, to pay attention, to orient ourselves as much as know ourselves to be capable of, to orient ourselves to hear that call, to follow where he leads, to come when he beckons. To seek him is to follow him where he says come to see Jesus for who he is, and to abide with him where he stays and where he goes. All of this will change your life. Those two disciples experienced it. So did the first person they told, which is an essential part of discipleship: receiving and then sharing, following and then leading others to follow. Simon, who Jesus called Peter. To seek him, to follow him where he leads, is to be open to transformation. He will change you. You will not be the same person. Your deep gladness will change; your understanding of the world's great hunger will change. Your understanding of yourself, whom you give will change. Your understanding of God will change. God does not call us to a career or to one thing. God calls us to life, a relationship, a life embedded that flows in all kinds of different directions. God calls us to life with him.

This is true for young people just beginning to get their lives together; for those in the middle of life giving their lives away; and this is true for those toward the end of life whose eyes more and more turn to the divine light.

Come and see the life I have for you. Come and see the life I call you to, a life of abundance and purpose, of goodness and grace, of courage and faith, of sacrifice and likely some suffering. Come and see for yourself; come and see all the ways you will be changed as you know me.

The great Howard Thurman preached a famous sermon (*Callings*, 388) which he ended with a poem of sorts, a prayer of response to the God who calls. Here is Howard Thurman's prayer, and may it be ours:

*Give me the courage to live!
Really live—not merely exist.
Live dangerously,
Scorning risk!
Live honestly,
Daring the truth—*

Particularly the truth of myself!
Live resiliently—
Ever changing, ever-growing, ever adapting.
Enduring the pain of change
As though 'twere the travail of birth.
Give me the courage to live
Give me the strength to be free
And endure the burden of freedom
And the loneliness of those without chains
Let me not be trapped by success.
Nor by failure, nor pleasure, nor grief,
Nor malice, nor praise, nor remorse!
Give me the courage to go on!
Facing all that waits on the trail—
Going eagerly, joyously on,
And paying my way as I go,
Without anger or fear or regret
Taking what life gives,
Spending myself to the full,
Head high, spirit winged, like a god—
On. . . on . . . till the shadows draw close.
That even when darkness shuts down,
And I go out alone, as I came,
Naked and blind as I came—
Even then, gracious God, hear my prayer
Give me the courage to live!

May God give us ears to hear, eyes to see, and the faith to follow whatever the next step is on this beautiful journey of life and the life we share together. Amen.