

When God Comes to Call

It probably seemed like any other day. There would have been all the usual worries about wind, tides, and weather. There were fish to catch and clean, nets to mend, creditors to satisfy, Roman soldiers to avoid. Galilee being only twenty-four miles from the Jordan River, Andrew, Simon, James, and John had probably heard of John the Baptist, who had built up quite a following. Would word have gotten around Galilee that John had been arrested? Would they even care? The four weren't Temple priests or Herod's courtiers. They were just hardworking fishermen, scraping out a subsistence living. Perhaps they, like their fellow Israelites, had briefly imagined that John might be the Messiah, but his arrest would have dashed their hopes if his denials hadn't. Odds are, none of them had taken time away from their boats to hear John speak. Such diversions would have been for those who could afford to squander their time on a junket into the wilderness, not for poor laborers whose livelihood depended on going out to sea every single, backbreaking day.

They might have heard there was a new guy in Galilee proclaiming the good news of God. Would-be Messiahs were common enough, useful for entertainment if not for actual liberation. Maybe James and John were still young enough to imagine that each new self-proclaimed Messiah might be the real deal. Maybe Andrew or Simon had grown more cynical. Maybe Zebedee had told his sons to stick to fishing and let the Temple authorities handle the prophecies. But however skeptical their hard lives might have made them, all Jesus had to say was "Follow me," and all four got up and walked away from everything they knew. Why?

People don't usually answer "I'm here, Lord – send me" the moment God calls. The normal response is some variation on "who, me? You can't possibly mean me. I'm not worthy. Pick somebody else." It's a shame our lectionary only gives us a snippet of the Book of Jonah

this morning, because the larger story is hilarious. Adonai calls Jonah to go east and warn the Ninevites that he's about to smite them for their wickedness. Jonah runs away, boarding a ship headed due west. Not to be denied, Adonai whips up a storm on the Mediterranean that threatens to capsize the boat. To save themselves, the terrified sailors hurl Jonah overboard. A gigantic fish swallows him and starts swimming east; it's the Biblical equivalent of an Uber. Three days later, the fish spits Jonah up right on the eastern shore. This time, when God tells Jonah to carry his message to Nineveh, Jonah obeys. The Ninevites repent so extravagantly that they even put their livestock in sackcloth. Adonai relents, leaving Jonah wondering why he even bothered to warn the Ninevites when he knew God was going to forgive those reprobates all along. If you've ever been disappointed when someone escaped a punishment they richly deserved, you know exactly how Jonah feels. No matter how grateful we are for God's mercy in our own lives, sometimes it seems as though a little smiting might be just the thing to set somebody else straight.

Jonah wasn't alone in questioning God's call. Gideon and Jeremiah feared their calls. Isaiah doubted his own worthiness. Samuel, called as a child, didn't understand whose voice he heard until his mentor Eli explained it. Even the great prophet Moses resisted as Adonai insisted. But when Jesus crooks a finger, Andrew, Simon, James, and John immediately follow. These four will be Jesus's most trusted disciples. Simon will become Peter, the rock on which Jesus will build his church. But they can't know that when Jesus first appears. Tradition tells us that Peter was a primary source for Mark's Gospel which, in turn, became a primary source for Matthew and Luke. Maybe Peter remembered the day that changed his life forever the way Mark describes it. Maybe he really did follow Jesus without hesitation – Peter was always a “leap before you look” kind of guy. Maybe the others were swept along by Peter's enthusiasm. They couldn't have imagined the glory and heartbreak that lay before them, and they didn't yet know that the man

who called them was more than a rabbi or a merely mortal liberator, so they followed Jesus without fully understanding what they were getting into. But I suspect there was something about seeing Jesus in the flesh that made his call so compelling. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophets were called by a disembodied, supernatural voice, which must have been pretty scary. Jesus's voice would have been reassuringly human even if it was tinged with the divine. The combination must have been irresistible. And that was good, because Jesus was on deadline. He only had three years to change the world. He couldn't wait around for the disciples to join him, so maybe he ratcheted his heavenly charisma up a notch or two when he first encountered them.

My fellow preachers sometimes use this Gospel passage to scold anyone who doesn't immediately leap up and go whenever they think they hear the voice of God. Respectfully, I think that's unfair. Jesus may still appear to people once in a while, but it's hardly the norm. We don't have the luxury of seeing him face to face the way Andrew, Simon, James, and John did; that's a joy we can anticipate in the next world, but not in this one. While we're on this side of heaven, I think Jesus wants us to answer his call a little differently than they did.

Although Jesus has ascended, John's Gospel confirms that the Holy Spirit lingers among us. Since that first, spectacular appearance to the apostles at Pentecost, the Spirit has really settled down. Her voice has become very quiet, and she tends to speak to us in hints, nudges, and serendipities. If we want to hear what the Spirit is saying, we have to settle down ourselves and really *listen*. It takes time and discernment to distinguish the voice of the Holy Spirit from our own egos, desires, and fears. Common sense plays a role. The Holy Spirit probably isn't calling you to buy that Bentley convertible or to quit your job, sell everything you own and move to Tibet to become a hermit. But she might be, and you can't be sure unless you take the time to listen for her voice, watch for her signs and prayerfully contemplate what you see and hear.

If you can't imagine why the Holy Spirit would ever call little old you, you're letting your modesty get in the way of your destiny. God doesn't just call prophets, apostles, and clergy. Every one of us is needed to help the Holy Spirit usher in the Kingdom. Our catechism affirms that lay people have a special ministry: "to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church." That's your job, and it's essential. I could preach all day long, but without each of you, the work of the Church would go undone and God's vision would be unfulfilled.

As the great 19th century English theologian and saint John Henry Newman said, "in truth we are not called once only, but many times; all through our life Christ is calling us ... he calls us on from grace to grace, and from holiness to holiness, while life is given us." Or, if you prefer a more modern authority, the Reverend Barbara Brown Taylor has observed that we each have many callings, relational and professional, and sometimes we're called away from something we were called for a time to do. Sometimes we're called not to do, but to *be*: a parent, a spouse, a teacher, or a friend. None of us will be asked to lead the Exodus or follow Jesus from Galilee to Golgotha and beyond. The time for those things has passed. But having a more modest call doesn't make you any less important. God prefers to work through people who aren't rich, famous, or powerful. Jesus could have dialed up his divinity, marched straight into the Temple and commanded the High Priest. He could have charmed the socks off Herod and Pilate. But he chose ordinary people to be his closest companions and help him carry out his mission. Each of us has the opportunity to join them in his circle of friends if we're brave, faithful, and flexible enough to do it. My prayer is that each of us will answer the Holy Spirit's calls and enter into the grand adventure that God has planned for the world. We just need to get up and follow. *Amen.*