

The Call as a Journey

There are many ways in which today's Gospel text could be preached. One typical way, one which I have used, is to focus on Philip's invitation to Nathanael, to "Come and See" as the simplest way to evangelize. The focus of this is to show that we are not called to knock on the doors of strangers and make a strong, ironclad theological thesis of why they should be a Christian and join our church. The simplest way to evangelize is to invite a person, someone we know, to just 'come and see' for themselves. This is not a bad way to look at this text. This is a simple invitation that is repeated throughout the Gospel. In fact, just before this text, Jesus, himself, invited Andrew, Peter's brother to 'come & see' when Andrew asked Jesus where He was staying. However, what I want to focus today on is the call narratives that we have heard in the first reading from 1st Samuel and in the Gospel text and look at them from a little different perspective from how we normally look at call narratives and see what they have to say to us, today.

In the first reading, we hear the call narrative of Samuel, the prophet. When he was a boy, serving in the Temple under Eli the priest, he hears the Lord's voice three times, mistaking each time source of voice. After Eli realized that it was the Lord calling Samuel, he told Samuel to answer. We then hear that the Lord stands before him and speaks. This 'narrative' is similar to others who were being called by God, such as Moses and other prophets. Moses kept looking for excuses to not do what God wants - he doesn't know anyone and they don't know him; he doesn't know what to say; and he stutters. Each objection by Moses is set aside by God until Moses is ready to accept, ready to listen to God and do God's will. If we take a look at the call narratives of others in the Bible, we would see that many of these stories follow a similar pattern.

This pattern, in broad terms, could be described as a journey. There are very few people who have been called by God who accepted that call willingly and cheerfully to do God's will the first time. Each person who had been called by God has taken a journey to accept that call from God & embark on the journey of fulfilling that call. That journey is typically different for each person, both in the timeframe and how they respond.

In the Gospel reading, we may not readily see this pattern because of all that is happening in the text. One facet we often overlook is that it is Jesus who finds Philip. We tend to focus on Philip finding Nathanael and then look at the sarcastic reply by Nathanael. But just like in the Old Testament; God, as Jesus, calls someone. When Jesus says, "Follow Me" we should hear it as "Be my disciple and journey with Me." There is a segment among Christianity that believes that our conversion, our calling to be a Christian, is a kind of "one and done" deal. We receive the Holy Spirit and we decide to follow Jesus. But it isn't like that at all. We have many ups and downs in trying to live the "Christian life" and we often wind-up wondering, why didn't God just do it and get it done with; why didn't God make this following Him easier? The simple answer is that if God did that, then we would have no choice but to do what God tells us, much like a puppeteer & their puppets. But, being created in God's image means that we have a choice, that we are not just puppets, being manipulated by someone greater than us.

This sense of journey is found throughout the Bible: God chose a wandering Aramean, Abraham, through whom God would show the world what God desires. The Israelites journeyed, or wandered, for 40 years in the wilderness before entering the land that God promised them. During that journey, they learned to depend upon God - a lesson that they needed to learn several times throughout

their history. In the Book of Malachi, the prophet talks of God as being like a refiner of gold or silver. The process of purifying gold takes time - it takes time for the impurities to burn off from the pure metal, leaving the pure metal behind.

Luther picked up on this theme of a journey when he wrote:

This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness; not health, but healing; not being, but becoming; not rest, but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it. The process is not yet finished, but it is going on. This is not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified. (Defense and Explanation of all the Articles (1521), Luther's Works vol. 39.)

Our journeys are like that. We need time to learn to let go of those things that are not really important for us and to learn to depend on God. Like the Israelites, this is a lesson that we need to learn many times throughout our lives.

Learning these stories about the servants of God in the Bible, we can see how our journeys of faith mirror their stories. How many times, when we reflect on our lives, has God called us to do something and we try to ignore it or say we can't do it for a myriad of reasons? As we see with each of those whom God called in the Bible, they succeeded in what God called them to do. Moses led the people out of Egypt, the prophets proclaimed God's word to the people. It could be argued that they weren't successful because the people didn't change, but that wasn't the prophets' fault, rather it was the peoples' fault. Each person was given what they needed to achieve what God wanted them to achieve. So it is with us. Whatever God calls us to do, whenever we are ready to hear His word and follow, we are given the gifts needed to be successful. God isn't about failure or giving us a 'practical exam' to see if we are worthy of being saved. God has already saved us through Jesus. As we heard from the Psalmist, we cannot go anywhere where God has not been already, therefore, God will not ask us to go

into uncharted territory. God will give us the tools & guides we need if we perceive where we are going is unknown to us. That's the other thing we can glean from Samuel's call and the stories of Nathanael, Andrew, Peter and countless others. They needed the help of someone else to point them to God or Jesus, they didn't do it all on their own.

So, next time we feel a call from God, regardless of whether we think it is something big or small, may we be willing to accept that call, following where the Holy Spirit leads us, confident that God will prevail.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/BNK7KEwABR4>

Service: <https://youtu.be/iehj7ySMWvs>