

First Sermon for Sebastian
“Hearing God Call Your Name”
1 Samuel 3:1-10 and John 15:16 (NRSV)
By Rev. John Gill

A new young preacher came to his first church, a little old country church. The first Sunday, only one person showed up for the morning service, a little old man in bib-overalls. The Preacher said to the man, "Brother, you seem to be the only one to show up this morning, should I preach or what?" The little old man replied, "Well Sir, I ain't no preacher, I'm just an old farmer, but if I had a truck load of hay, and I went to the pasture and only one cow showed up, I'd feed that cow!"

The Preacher, inspired by these words of wisdom, began to preach like he never had before, he preached everything he had learned or heard and then began to make up stuff. Finally after 2-hours, he finished. He looked to the little old man and said, "Well brother, what did you think of my first sermon here?"

The little old man replied, "Well Sir, I ain't no preacher, I'm just a little old farmer, but if I had a truck load of hay and I went to the pasture and only one cow showed up, I wouldn't dump the whole load on him!"

I'll try not to "dump the who load" in this first sermon! We plan to be here in Sebastian for years, so there will be ample opportunities to share with you in sermons and bible studies.

Terri and I want to take this opportunity to again express again to all of you how grateful we are for the amazing welcome we have received in Sebastian! You have been so gracious that we already feel at home and part of this church family! We are really glad we are here!

Obviously, this is a special time in my life. It was an honor last Sunday to have been installed as your pastor. I consider it a privilege to have received a "call from God" to share in ministry here in Sebastian, and I pledge to you this morning that, with God's help, I will do my best in leading this congregation.

Last Sunday, as we all participated in the service of installation, we made a covenant with one another, and with God. You and I promised that we would be partners in ministry – pastor and congregation working together to make this church all that God intends for it to be.

You see, there isn't supposed to be only one "minister" in a church; there should be hundreds (whatever the membership is)! The truth is that God doesn't just call the clergy to be ministers. Every person who has been baptized into the Christian faith receives a "call" from God to be a "minister" to others.

That's why I have chosen as the theme for our reflection this morning – "God's call" – especially as God calls each of us to follow him in ministry and service. It's an important subject because we ALL have experienced the "calling of God" in our lives, and each of us has responded to that call – at least to some degree.

You know, I wish we had the time this morning for each person here to stand and share a little bit about your own sense of "calling." I'm sure that each testimony would be unique and different – mine

wouldn't be the same a Sue's, or Bill's, or Sharon's, or Bill's (or any of yours). It would be a fascinating thing to hear. (Perhaps we could share that at our "Getting to Know You" gatherings.)

But since we can't do that this morning, I want to share with you a little about my experience of God's calling on my life, because I believe that it's important that you know what motivates me in my ministry.

When a person is interested in becoming a pastor, she or he has to go through, what is known as, "the Candidacy Process." When I was going through candidacy in the mid-1980s, one of the things we were asked to do was make a survey of the Bible to examine many of the various Biblical characters and notice how God called each of them into ministry. Then we were to decide which Biblical "call" we most identified with, and why.

It turned out to be a great exercise! One of the things I discovered was that, when you look at the Biblical examples, you find that their experience is just like our's today – just as varied, just as individual, and just as unique. So, this morning, I'd like to take all of us through that same exercise. We'll consider four Biblical characters who received a call to ministry from God. As we do, I want you to ask yourself which Bible character YOU most identify with. Are you ready?

First, Let's think about MOSES.

You probably remember the story of how God called Moses: how he was born a Jew, but raised as a prince of Egypt – how he had a heart of compassion for his Hebrew brothers and sisters, so much so that one day, when he saw a Hebrew slave being beaten by an Egyptian, Moses killed the Egyptian and had to flee for his life, becoming a fugitive from justice. You'll recall how he escaped to the land of Midian, married into a devout religious family and took up the quiet life of a shepherd. Moses was quite comfortable with his new life.

But God has a way of shaking us up with we get too comfortable, doesn't he? One day, Moses notices a burning bush that wasn't being consumed – and he hears the voice of God. God commanded him to return to Egypt to stand before Pharaoh, and declare, "Let my people go!" And, no matter how much he objected or made excuses WHY he couldn't go – in the end, Moses said "yes" to God.

Now, Moses was called by God, NOT because he was a particularly religious or holy man. Far from it! He was guilty of murder! Why would God choose Moses to be his spokesman? Certainly, God could have chosen someone else – someone better-suited to become the leader of God's people.

But God called Moses for one reason, and one reason alone: Only Moses had the unique background needed to carry-out God's plan to save his people! God needed a leader, and Moses was it! God knew that, because Moses was raised as an Egyptian in the palace, he was the only Hebrew that Pharaoh would grant an audience to. And, because he was a Hebrew, the Hebrew slaves would trust his leadership. COULD God have called somebody else? NO! Moses was uniquely qualified – and THAT is why God called him.

Some of us here this morning have heard God call-out our name from a burning bush, challenging us to take on some task of ministry – a mission that we didn't seek out, and didn't really want. God chose us – not because we are some "super-Christians," or particularly well-qualified for the job – but simply because we happen to be the only person who is in a position to do whatever it is God wants done. And, like Moses, we can object and make excuses all we want – but God will have the last say!

Now, think about this: Are YOU a Moses? Are you in a unique position to perform some ministry in our church or in the Sebastian community that only YOU can do? Have you been making excuses why you can't? Is God calling you to step out of your comfortable safe life and take a bold risk for God?

This morning, what do you hear God saying to YOU from a burning bush?

Another of my favorite figure in the Old Testament is JONAH. I love the Book of Jonah – so many of us can identify with him. Like Moses, God gave Jonah a particular task – one which Jonah had no desire to do. God commanded Jonah to go to the pagan city of Ninevah (right into the heart of enemy territory) and call those people to repent of their sins, that they might be saved.

But Jonah hated the Ninevites! You recall how he did everything in his power to avoid God's call. Instead of going to Ninevah, Jonah ran as fast as he could in the opposite direction. He boarded a ship bound for some distant shore, intending to escape from God's call. But, no matter how far he tried to run, Jonah couldn't out-run God.

As you know, God caused a great storm to develop on the sea, and Jonah was thrown overboard. And, of course, you remember what happened next – the Bible tells us he was swallowed by a whale. And after spending three depressing days in its belly, Jonah was spit out on the shore.

Only then did Jonah grudgingly go to Ninevah and deliver God's message of grace. And, when they did repent and were saved from God's wrath – was Jonah happy? NO. He pouted like a spoiled child. And God proved, once again, that he calls and uses even those of us who are unwilling to serve.

Anybody here ever felt like Jonah? This is how God's call comes to some of us. We have a sense of God's leading in our lives – we know deep-down that he wants us to do something – something that we really don't want to do. But, no matter how hard we try to resist and rebel against God's will for our lives, we find we can't escape. God just won't leave us alone! (Someone has describe God as "The Hound of Heaven.")

Finally (often grudgingly) we surrender to God's will and do it, and then discover that God can work through us, even when we are not enthusiastic about it.

Perhaps you have felt God calling you to move in a direction you don't want to go – to minister to a people you consider to be sinners, people you think don't deserve God's mercy and grace. Maybe you have been wrestling with this calling on your life for a long time, but have refused to surrender – even have run in the opposite direction. But God just won't leave you alone.

If this describes you, then remember Jonah's experience – that, if you will let him, God can work miracles through you, even if you don't believe in miracles. All God needs from you is obedience to his will – and he will do the rest.

My new friends, think about this: Where is your "Ninevah? Who are those in our community who desperately need to experience the love, grace and mercy of God – people God keeps placing on your heart? What call to ministry have YOU been running away from?

The third type of call I'd like for us to consider this morning is probably the most familiar of them all – PAUL.

Who can ever forget Paul's dramatic "Damascus Road" experience? Paul (as you might recall) was a persecutor of the church, hunting down the followers of Jesus. But then, on the Damascus Road, the Risen Christ appeared to Paul in a blinding light – an experience that completely turned his life around. No longer was Paul the chief persecutor of the Christian faith, he became its chief proponent!

As a result of his "call" on the Damascus Road, Paul almost single-handedly carried the Gospel all around the Mediterranean world, establishing churches wherever he went.

Paul's experience of his call was cataclysmic. He made a complete "about-face." The change in his life was so radical that many of the early Christians had trouble believing it was real. But it was – and Paul's lifetime of service and his death as a martyr confirm the genuineness of his call.

I'm sure there are some of you here this morning who could stand up and share about your own "Damascus Road" experience. When Christ came into your life, he turned it upside-down and inside-out. Usually, people who experience the call of God in such a dramatic way are eager to tell others about it.

If you had a dramatic conversion experience, I want to encourage you NOT to keep it to yourself! Tell the world what God has done for you! Your testimony has power to reach others for Christ. You, like Paul, can be a "missionary," sharing the Good News that God can-and-does change lives!

Is Paul's experience YOUR experience? Has your life been turned "upside-down and inside-out" because, when you least expected it, out-of-the-blue, you heard God call YOUR name? If so, what are you going to do about it?

The final example of how God calls people we will consider this morning is SAMUEL.

I selected his "call" as our scripture lesson this morning because Samuel's story is the calling I most identify with. Samuel was dedicated to the service of God as an infant and raised with the priest in the tabernacle of God. He served God all his life. He knew no other life than the religious life. Unlike Paul, Samuel's call was not very dramatic at all. In fact, when God was calling his name, Samuel confused the voice of God with that of Eli, the priest who raised him.

Finally, Eli discerned that it was God who was calling Samuel, and told him that, if it happened again, to respond, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening." And Samuel went on to become one of the most respected prophets of God.

I identified with Samuel more than with any of the others precisely BECAUSE his call was so gradual – so un-dramatic. Like Samuel, I was raised among the priests. I am a P.K., with lots of preachers in my family, including my father. I grew up in the church, and never knew any life BUT the church. And, like Samuel, when God began calling my name, I confused it with something else.

Having grown up in the shadow of my father, I decided early on that I would NOT become a minister – not that I had anything against the ministry – I just wanted to chart my own course-in-life, not following in my father’s tracks. You see, I am the only son in my family, and I inherited my father’s name: I’m “John the Third.” I also knew that, deep down, my father had hoped and prayed that I would go into the ministry. But I chose to “go my own way” – a little like Jonah.

Looking back, I can now see that God was “speaking” to me THROUGH my father, but I was deaf to hearing God’s voice. Instead, I decided to become a teacher in the public school. I went to college and earned a degree in Music Education.

But when I went through internship, I felt uneasy – as if God had other plans for my life. I decided to go on to graduate school and earn a Master’s Degree in Church Music Education, intending to be a full-time music or Christian education director in a church. But again, after two years of graduate school, I continued to feel restless, as if my plans – and God’s plans for me – were still at odds.

Then God finally spoke clearly to me – not through a burning bush, or from the belly of a fish, or a blinding light. God spoke to me through – a questionnaire! (I TOLD you God uses unique ways to call folks!)

At graduate school, we all were required to take a course in “Church Administration” – and one of the things we were asked to do was to fill out a “Leadership-style Assessment” inventory. Everyone else in the class scored high in “servant” and “disciple” styles of leadership (as would be expected of those going into the lay ministry fields of church music and Christian education). But I scored high in “King,” “Wiseman,” and “Priest” – responses that are typically given by those going into ordained ministry!

The teacher asked if I had ever considered that God MIGHT be calling me into the ordained ministry. Until that moment, I had never seriously considered that God might be calling MY name. And, I finally said, “yes.”

Suddenly, the world seemed different. The uneasiness and restlessness went away. The more I prayed, the more it became clear that it was God’s will that I go to seminary – NOT because my father wanted me to, but because God wanted me to!

Once I surrendered to God’s will, I finally felt at peace, and began to experience the joy in my faith that had been lacking. I KNEW that God called me BY NAME into the ministry. Like Samuel, I finally answered his call, “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.” And I’ve never regretted it.

My friends, God calls every one of us in unique ways. He speaks each of our names – and waits for us to respond.

I believe that God is call your name right now! Are you listening?

It may be that you, like MOSES, are hearing the voice of God from a “burning bush,” challenging you to step forward in leadership. Or perhaps you have heard God’s persistent call, and have been running away from it, like JONAH. Or maybe, like PAUL, this morning will be your Damascus Road experience which will turn you around and change the direction of your life forever. Or, like SAMUEL, perhaps God

has be quietly calling you over-and-over-and-over again, just waiting for you to recognize his voice and say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

Or perhaps, you might identify with some other character in the Bible who God called in some other unique way, for some other unique purpose.

Whatever is your experience, my prayer for you is that this morning you will respond to the God's call, and accept the challenge which God is laying before YOU.

You will never be sorry you did.

Prayer

Lord, we know you are calling out to each one of us – calling us by name – challenging us to “step up to the plate” and do our part for your Kingdom. Forgive us, Lord when we turn a deaf ear to your voice. Help us tune our hearts to hear you call our names, and give us the will to say, “Here I am, Lord, I’m listening.”

Benediction

(John 15:16) - “You did not choose me, but I chose you, and I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.” God now, to live out the ministry to which YOU have been called through your baptism. Go as the those called by God to change the world. Amen.