

“Hearing God’s Call”

A sermon by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church
Durham, NC
10:55 a.m. Sunday, October 28, 2007

Text: Exodus 3:1-12

Matthew 14:22-33

NRSV

Opening prayer: Lord Jesus, give us receptive hearts and eyes of faith, that we may discern your call upon our lives. Amen.

WHERE ARE YOU IN THIS STORY?

John Belushi and Dan Ackroyd once starred in a movie called *The Blues Brothers*. They played a couple of ex-convict-wanna-be musicians who were trying to raise money for an orphanage. Anytime they were asked about their work, they had a standard response: “We’re on a mission from God.” They always said it as if they believed it. The very idea that two inept, unworthy human beings could be on a mission from God was the central joke of the whole story.

Here is the story of your life: You are on a mission from God.

Either that is true or you have no purpose, no mission, or you are doing your own thing. Jesus put it like this to his followers: “You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.” Others have come before us. Others will come after us. But this is our day. If God’s kingdom is to manifest itself right now, it will have to be through us. You are on a mission from God.

What our mission is, depends upon God’s call upon our life. To think of God calling us to do something can seem mysterious or way beyond our understanding. I like to think of it this way: God’s call on my life occurs where the interests, talents and personality God has given me intersect with the needs of the world. God has given me a certain personality, particular interests

and abilities. What does God want me to do with my personality, interests and abilities to meet significant human needs in this world? Living by faith in God involves discerning God's call.

When we discern God's call upon our lives and follow it, then we can experience purpose, meaning and joy in our lives. When we don't know why we are here on earth or what we are to do with our lives, life can be very frustrating.

Our gospel lesson today is an intriguing story of Jesus interacting with his disciples and particularly Peter. As I describe it for you, I invite you to consider where you are in this story.

Just before this account, Jesus has overseen the miraculous feeding of over 5,000 people. Jesus has fed people spiritually with his teaching and then physically with bread and fish. Jesus then orders his disciples to get into a boat and sail across to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. After Jesus finishes blessing the crowds of people, he climbs a mountain by himself to pray with God. When the sun sets, Jesus is still praying alone.

Meanwhile, the boat with the disciples is in the midst of a storm. The waves are battering the ship. They are still far from their destination because the wind is against them. During the fourth watch of the night, between 3 and 6 a.m., Jesus sees them in their distress. He comes walking toward them on the sea.

When the disciples see Jesus walking on the sea, they are terrified. They cry out in fear, "It is a ghost!" Immediately Jesus speaks to them and says, "Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid."

Are you like the disciples, terrified, uncertain of whether the figure walking on the sea toward you is a ghost or Jesus? Are you in the middle of a storm in your life now? Are you afraid of the future? Do you have health problems? Are you under a lot of stress at work? Are you having financial difficulties? Are you experiencing relationship problems in your family? Is your boat being battered by the waves? In the midst of the storm, can you trust that Jesus is there? Or is it just a ghost – a figment of your imagination? Is this where you are now?

When Jesus says, “Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid,” Peter responds. Peter answers Jesus, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Jesus replies, “Come.” So Peter climbs out of the boat, starts walking on the water and comes toward Jesus.

Are you like Peter? Have you heard God’s call and now you are stepping out in faith to move toward Jesus?

Are you growing in your faith? In trusting God with your health challenges? Perhaps you recently made the decision to tithe next year, or to take some significant steps toward tithing. Are you following God’s direction for your life in your marriage? In your family? At your work? In your service through the church? Are you listening to God and striving to be obedient? Is this where you are?

Jesus tells Peter to come. So Peter climbs out of the boat and starts walking on the water to Jesus. He is walking on the water, and then he notices the furious wind blowing. Peter becomes frightened and begins to sink.

Are you like Peter here? You know Jesus is there. You heard him speak to you. But the strong winds of your circumstances overcome your faith. You start to doubt yourself and you begin to sink into the sea. Is this where you are? Are you sinking?

Have you made unwise financial choices and are getting into debt over your head? Are you overwhelmed by the problems at work – or at school? Are you suffering from a broken relationship? Are you failing at school or work? Have you or a family member just received some bad news from the doctor? Are you depressed and without hope for the future? Is this where you are?

Peter is frightened by the howling winds and the crashing waves. He cries out, “Lord, save me.” Immediately, Jesus reaches out his hand and catches him. Jesus tells Peter, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” Jesus and Peter get into the boat. The wind ceases. The waves grow calm. The disciples in the boat worship Jesus. They exclaim, “Truly you are the Son of

God.”

Are you like Peter and the disciples here? You have experienced salvation. You may have experienced the saving grace of Jesus many times in your life. You know the saving power of Christ. When you doubt in your own power or talents or abilities, you know who to call on.

Do you have a “Wow!” feeling about God? When the wind ceases and your heart is calm, do you fall on your knees and worship Jesus as the Son of God? Do you praise and offer thanksgiving to the living God who is active in your life? Are you like Peter here – asking Jesus for help and thanking God for his gracious assistance and love?

A GHOST OR JESUS?

In this account the disciples had to discern whether the figure in the storm, walking toward them on the water, was a ghost, or whether it was Jesus.

The disciples were convinced that the figure was a ghost, so they were terrified and cried out in fear. We may wonder how they could have failed to know that it was Jesus. Who else could it be? Sometimes it takes eyes of faith to recognize when Jesus is around. Often in the middle of the storm, tormented by waves of disappointment and doubt, we are no better at recognizing Jesus’ presence than they were.

Matthew wants his readers to know that Jesus often comes when least expected – at 3:00 a.m. in the middle of a storm. Author Dale Bruner writes that “according to the Holy Scriptures, human extremity is the frequent meeting place with God.” When the storm is raging in our lives, God is there.

Twelve disciples sat in the boat. We don’t know how eleven of them responded to Jesus’ voice, saying, “Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid.” Perhaps with confusion, wonder, disbelief, or a little bit of each.

One of the disciples in the boat, Peter, recognizes that Jesus is present – even in a most

unlikely place, walking on the water. So Peter blurts out, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Jesus replies, “Come.”

Why did Peter ask this question? Why didn't Peter just plunge into the water? Before Peter climbs out of the boat, he wants to make sure that Jesus thinks it is a good idea. This means that I will have to discern between an authentic call from God and what might simply be a foolish impulse on my part. Courage alone is not enough. It must be accompanied by wisdom and discernment.

The gospel writer Matthew is not glorifying risk-taking for its own sake. Jesus is not looking for bungee jumping, hang-gliding, day-trading, tornado-chasing Pinto drivers. John Ortberg writes, “It is possible for us to make courageous, high-risk decisions that are stupid.”

God has created us in his image. We have our individual longings, personalities and talents. No one else is exactly like you. God has gifted you. God empowers you. God also calls you to serve him. Arthur Miller puts it this way: “(A calling) is using one's endowed giftedness to serve the world with excellence and, through that service, to love and honor God! The calling that fully engages what God has given you is a holy task!”

USING OUR GIFTS TO LOVE GOD

John Ortberg describes a calling as “something you discover, not something you choose.” Time after time in the Bible God calls someone to do his work. God equips the worker and assigns the work.

Who knows? God could be calling you into ordained ministry. God could be calling you into full-time Christian service as a church musician or Christian educator, or missionary. God could be calling you to become a school teacher or a nuclear physicist.

So how do we discover this calling from God? I believe that different people discover it differently. It could be alone in silence, prayer and meditation – in listening for God's voice in

our hearts. For some people it is through Bible reading, study and reflection. God speaks to them through his words and teachings in the Bible. For other people God's call is confirmed in individual conversations or group discussions. Some people, like the prophet Isaiah, hear God's call unmistakably during worship. Other people discern God's call while participating in hands-on service.

Many people discover God's call through a combination of these methods. The experience in worship may confirm the feeling of the hands-on service. The individual conversation with a trusted friend may confirm learnings from the Bible study.

American society does not talk much about calling anymore. It is more likely to think in terms of career. Benjamin Hunnicutt is a historian who specializes in the history of work at the University of Iowa. He notes that work has become our new religion, where we worship and give our time. When people's commitments to family, community and faith shrink, they begin to look to their careers to provide them with meaning, connectedness, identity, and esteem.

A calling, which is something I do for God, can be replaced by a career, which threatens to become my god. A career is something I choose for myself. A calling is something I receive.

Any vocation can become a career when the emphasis is about advancement and achievement – promising status, money or power. On the other hand, any vocation can become a calling from God when it is truly done to serve God and others.

The people whom we read about in Scripture who were called by God usually felt quite inadequate. When God called Abraham to leave home, or Gideon to lead an army, or Esther to defy the king, or Mary to give birth to the Messiah, their initial response was never, “Yes, I'm up to that challenge. I think I can handle that.”

Henry Blackaby writes, “I have come to the place in my life that, if the assignment I sense God is giving me is something that I know I can handle, I know it is probably not from God. The kind of assignments God gives in the Bible are always God-sized. They are always

beyond what people can do, because he wants to demonstrate his nature, his strength, his provision, and his kindness to his people and to a watching world.”

When God calls us, it is God and us doing it together. We are not called just to work for God. We are called to work with God.

Consider the call of Moses. One day when Moses was keeping a flock of sheep, he came to Horeb, the mountain of God. Moses sees a bush, blazing with fire, but is not consumed. Moses turns to look at the bush. When God gets Moses’ attention, God calls him. Does God have our attention?

God gave Moses a specific call. It was clear that Moses could not accomplish it in his own power. This was the call: Go to Pharaoh, the most powerful man on earth. Tell him to allow his labor force, the Hebrew slaves, to leave without compensation to worship a god he doesn’t believe in. Then convince a timid, stiff-necked people to run away into the desert. That’s your calling.

It did not take Moses long to respond to God: “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (Exodus 3:11) God responds, “I will be with you.” God is telling Moses that he will not do this in his own power. He will be in a partnership with God.

Moses encounter with God at the burning bush on Mt. Horeb began a continuing conversation between God and Moses. We read this conversation through many chapters of the book of Exodus. Moses’ discernment of God’s call and his working out of that call was a step-by-step process.

That is the way that God’s call upon our lives works. It is a living, active, dynamic interchange between God and us.

Whether it is Jesus calling Peter to climb out of the boat and walk on the water to him, or whether it is God calling Moses through the burning bush to lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt, or whether it is God calling you and me, living by faith in God involves discerning God’s

call.

So now it is time for the final question of today's sermon. What is God calling you to do for him? Amen.