

When you think about it, the “call” stories are some of the stand out moments in the whole bible. These are the moments when God speaks powerfully to individuals, calling them to do something, to take on a particular task or ministry, to lead His people at a particularly trying or dangerous time.

There is the call of Moses for example when God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, calling Him to set his people free and lead them out of slavery in Egypt to the promised land.

God spoke to Noah, calling him to build an ark to carry his family above the flood, along with a mating pair of every animal of every kind.

He spoke to Joseph in dreams, bringing him inexplicably to Egypt where he could eventually become the salvation of his people.

One of the most famous call stories is that of St. Paul on the road to Damascus. A zealot and a persecutor of Christians, Paul is suddenly struck blind by a light “flashing from heaven.” He hears the voice of Jesus calling him to cease his persecutions and then eventually the voice of Ananias who heals and baptizes Paul, causing the ‘scales to fall from his eyes’ and leading him to become God’s great Apostle bringing the gospel of Jesus to the gentiles.

Last week we heard what might be thought of as the call story of Jesus at His baptism.

In today’s readings we have a number call stories, beginning with the call of the boy Samuel in the temple with Eli. In the gospel passage there is the call of Philip and Andrew, as well as that of Nathanael.

These call moments often come at times of drama and difficulty: slavery in Egypt, flood, famine, persecution, breakdown in the ministry of the priesthood under Eli. The call often comes in times of great transition. The call of Samuel comes at what is still to this day considered one of the great turning points in the whole history of the Jewish people. The boy Samuel, after delivering his difficult message to Eli, goes on to make the transition from the period of the Judges to the period of Kings by himself anointing Saul, the first of the messiahs, the first anointed king of Israel.

Often the person called seems at first glance somehow inappropriate. Often they seem as though they could not possibly be the right person, like Paul for instance. They often feel in themselves that they are somehow inadequate to fulfill the calling as Moses did. “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” he asks.

Sometimes they hear the voice of God but do not recognize it at first, as Samuel did. They are often too young, or too old, or they are barren and unable to bear the child they are called to bear, like Sarah and Abraham. Perhaps they come from the wrong place - “Can anything good come out of Galilee?” asks Nathanael of in reference to Jesus in today's passage.

Often the person hears the voice of God and the call but they are reluctant, they decline at first. They are unworthy, the wrong sex, the wrong tribe, the wrong something. They are excellent fisherman but not educated in speaking and leading. Rare is the call story in which the person is the obvious candidate who clearly has everything needed to fulfill the call. Always the task seems insurmountable and daunting, something that could not be accomplished without God's help.

Perhaps you've had that experience yourself in some way. Perhaps you've experienced a prompting in your heart telling you there is something you alone must do. Maybe you've even heard a voice calling your name, or speaking to you in some other way. Many of us experience the call of the Holy Spirit in our work or in our families. It's my belief that God's call is there in all the deep ways we come to know ourselves. We just come to know that some things are 'who we are' and some are not.

One of the most compelling sources of this in the bible, one of the places it's recognized with greatest clarity and nuance is in Psalm 139. I asked Lyn to include the whole psalm in the leaflet today, and we said it rather than sang it, because I wanted us all to hear the unique voice and call of this psalm.

I really cannot think of anything quite like anywhere else in the Psalms. To my ear it is strikingly modern. It speaks with beauty and power of the *closeness* of God to us. In my life, this has been most valuable to me at times of greatest difficulty - often the same times when we hear God's calling the most. Perhaps that's why we associate this psalm most often with funerals. It is so very helpful at those times but, in my view, we ought not to leave it there. It's so helpful to be able today to consider it in the context of the call stories and *also* simply as a resource to us in our struggle both to know ourselves and to know our Creator.

In the end that may be it's most valuable insight for us: that the process of coming to know ourselves and coming to know God are - in some mysterious way - on a continuum. The two processes are inseparable from one another. The one is organically related to the other. It has

come to be my deep conviction that as human beings we really cannot fully know ourselves without also in some way knowing God, Christ, the Divine, a higher power, whichever is our preferred way of naming the Transcendent One. I can think of few - if any - instances where this is articulated with such beauty and clarity as it is in Psalm 139.

As a lover of the natural world I've often been watched flocks birds flying together and marvelled at their incredible fluidity and closeness. They turn and wheel in huge numbers without apparent direction or communication. Schools of fish do the same. Someone told me once that this is called 'sync.' It is surely among the most beautiful experiences of the human spirit to truly experience that the Holy Spirit flies in sync with us at times in this same way. The poet in me is awestruck by the way this is described and indeed re-experienced in Psalm 139.

There is one section of the Psalm that presents difficulty and must be treated with care. Verses 18 through 21 speak of hatred, killing of enemies, and the like. Although we left those verses out in our praying of the psalm earlier [and I need to say this with great care] their presence is valuable if we are to come to the full maturity of our spiritual potential, the full stature of Christ. It is heart breaking to think about it really, when we know that hurt that comes of it - something mature people do come to know more and more as we age and grow - but to fully know ourselves is to know also that we do have within us this capacity for the deepest sin. By God's grace and our own self control and spiritual growth most of us have these capacities under control most of the time. We seldom think of them. But we cannot project these sorrowful capacities entirely onto others whom we

condemn and demonize, saying that they have this darkness and we don't. To do so, is to claim a false righteousness, based on a failure to know and to face ourselves completely. It is also especially fashionable to do so in this day and age. To me, this is part of the great value of the Bible, it's divine genius if you will, that it *retains, witnesses, and records* these dark corners of the human heart we might otherwise choose to deny or at the very least ignore. I'm sure I don't need to give examples of the darkness into which human beings continually fall in our treatment of one another. A quick perusal of any newspaper on any given day would suffice.

The spiritual value of seeing, facing, and coming to terms with that darkness is something we'll begin again to explore with Jesus as we take up again the lenten journey to the Cross and beyond to Resurrection at Easter. It is journey of great value and great depth toward greater spiritual maturity. But only in so far as we can face our own participation in its darkness. Only then do we see the light that overcomes it.

I was recently advised that it is not a good thing to end a sermon with a quote. I have generally found that to be excellent advice, but I'm going to set it aside for today. I conclude with verse 16:

. 16 How deep I find your thoughts, O God! *
how great is the sum of them!