

## “Callings”

Sermon on Sunday, January 14, 2024

Dear church,

It can get weird, uncanny, when God calls people, when the path of individuals is altered by a spiritual force, when a mystical or even paranormal experience enters our consciousness. Stories like that are rarefied, even in the domain of religion; we heard one described this morning in the Old Testament reading. The boy Samuel heard a voice, someone calling his name, but no one was there. “Who was calling me?” Sam asked innocently. It took a while to sort it all out. It was God calling this young man to a vocation in ministry. Samuel, the name that translates to “God has heard,” became an important leader in Israel. Two books in the Hebrew Scriptures bear his name.

To this day we call it a vocation when someone hears a call from God. But those vocations are almost never as clear, revelatory, mind boggling as in this story. When someone hears a voice and nobody is there, we send the person to the doctor, right? Get checked out! Something must be wrong with you... Vocations to ministry aren’t issued with a bang from above. Typically, it’s a discernment process that takes place over a longer period, with perfectly “normal” thinking and doubts involved, nudging from the spirit, questions from the mind, desires from the heart. When I was young and interested in the work of God, the work of the church, I often asked myself whether this was truly a vocation for me or just a fancy. I thought I might enjoy this work, I was certainly drawn to the deeper questions of life, I felt comfortable in front of people, I prayed and searched for God’s will. That was more than most people my age engaged in, in terms of spiritual exploration, but was that “it”? I wish some angel in heaven had given me a hint or someone had called my name, but most of us mere mortals walk in the dark even as we begin to serve the light.

Yet sometimes people experience weird stuff that isn’t often mentioned in the playbooks of life. The stories deserve the term “unbelievable” because they belong to the outer edge of normal human experience. Let me tell you this story about a 20th century American pastor, Peter Marshall. After his death in 1949 – he was only 47, his wife Catherine wrote a book about his life, including his vocation. At the time of his death Marshall was one of the most recognizable clergymen in America. He had served the prominent New York Ave Presbyterian Church in the nation’s capital and was the appointed Chaplain of the United States Senate for several years. This is how Catherine Marshall recalls her husband’s vocation, based on his own memories that he shared with family and friends. Marshall had grown up in Scotland.

“One dark night, Peter, then a young man, decided to take a shortcut across the Scottish moors. He knew there was a deep deserted limestone quarry in that area, but he was confident he could avoid it. Suddenly, he heard someone call, “Peter!” There was great urgency in the voice. Peter stopped and called, “Yes, who is it? What do you want?”

There was no answer. He walked a few more steps and then heard the voice calling still more urgently, "Peter!" He paused then stumbled and fell on his knees. Putting out his hand to catch himself, he found nothing there! He was at the very edge of the abandoned stone quarry. One more step would have meant certain death."

Catherine Marshall adds the following words to this memory... "From that calling, Peter Marshall knew he was called by God for the ministry. Peter Marshall had a sense of calling, a sense that God had a purpose for his life. And I think in the same way each of us have been called by God to fulfill a purpose, to fulfill some task in this life, to become part of God's overall plan."

This is one of the most impressive modern vocation stories that I know. Another one involves one of my former teachers at the University of Munich who grew up in a non-religious, secular family. As a young man my teacher was influenced by the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, a philosopher who, about a hundred years ago, seduced scores of young people with his sharp intellect, prophetic insights, and mad hatred of church and culture. My teacher was one of them. A career in the context of religion and church was far from his mind. It wasn't even on the horizon. It was close to unthinkable. How then did he end up becoming a teacher of the church? He described it as follows:

"On the sixth of January 1945, while I was walking back home from school – a somewhat lengthy walk of several hours – an extraordinary event occurred in which I found myself absorbed into the light of the setting of the sun and for one eternal moment dissolved in the light surrounding me. When I became aware again of my finite existence, I did not know what happened but certainly knew that it was the most important event in my life; I spent many years afterwards to find out what it meant to me."

Now, God has a sense of humor. The 6th of January is the Feast of Epiphany, and it was on that Feast Day in 1945 that a magnificent light bulb of life-changing proportions went on for my teacher, breaking down his intellectual defenses. Most of us mere mortals don't have those experiences, but they do occur every once in a great while when some people for whatever reason become recipients of God's favor. In the meantime, and since we aren't all blessed with such extraordinary experiences, let us take to heart the words of Catherine Marshall. "Each of us have been called by God to fulfill a purpose, to fulfill some task in our life..." And if you still wonder what it might be – let the question sit with you for a little while until you feel an alignment in your soul or hear God talking to you, directly, indirectly, intuitively or by some tangible sign, there are a hundred ways... most of them perfectly normal. And then go and follow the light. It is the season of Epiphany. Amen.