

“God Calls Each of Us”

Rev. Dr. Bill Ekhardt

Luke records this story very early in Jesus’ ministry. Jesus, just a few chapters before, was tempted in the desert and then he went to his home town in Nazareth and was rejected; and, he began preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom of God: “Repent. The Kingdom of God is at hand.” And, he was healing people and, here, he had come to this lakeside and crowds had gathered. Perhaps they had heard him in synagogues, as he had been going through synagogues throughout Judea, and spreading this new message of the Kingdom of God.

They gathered around and they were pressed in. He needed a place to go so they could hear him. So he took one of the boats — it doesn’t say he asked Peter or Simon, at the time, to use his boat — he just assumed it, and I’m guessing that with the crowd around they were happy to comply. Simon took him out in the boat and he preached to this group.

We don’t know a lot. It doesn’t say specifically. Luke doesn’t record what Jesus’ message was here. But, as I mentioned earlier, we’d heard what Jesus had been teaching. We already know, throughout his other encounters, that he had been proclaiming something different. He was not like other teachers who had been coming through Judea. People marveled at his teaching. They said that he spoke with an authority that others didn’t have.

Jesus was not just teaching like other rabbis, but he was performing miracles — he was healing like prophets of old. Prophets were not common in those days. They had not been common since the return of Israel from the exile. But Jesus was even something different than that. We hear shortly that not only was Jesus teaching and healing, but he was forgiving sins. He was taking the authority of God and God’s own power, and teaching.

I mentioned the prophets back in the days of the exile of Israel. And, we heard in the earlier reading today of Isaiah’s call and, like Nehemiah — who Scott preached about last week, Isaiah was called to a difficult time. He was called to bear God’s word to a people who had not been following God. The very next passage in Isaiah describes this word of woe for Isaiah to bring to Israel, because the people had turned their back on God, and the kings had turned their back on God. The kings, in a series of kings, had turned away from the worship of Yahweh, their creator and deliverer, for their own political ends and their own relationships with other kingdoms around them.

Isaiah was called to share hard words and he was called in a vision, we see here. This vision of coming before the throne room of God — a vision similar to what we see in Revelation at the end of time. He was there and he could see the seraphim flying around, and he cried out, “Woe is me. I am a man of unclean lips, from a people of unclean lips, and I have seen the King, the Lord Almighty,” and before he went to be a vessel of the word of God, seraph came and cleansed his lips.

We see something similar in this story in the New Testament: Jesus, after he finished preaching or teaching to the crowds, asked Peter to go out farther in the deep. “Let’s put out, Peter.” And, I don’t know if Peter had ever seen or known of this man before. He knew, obviously, that he was a popular teacher, but he evidently wasn’t a fisherman,

because they had already finished the fishing. The fishing had happened earlier in the twilight hours. “And earlier is when we fish, because that is when we catch fish, and this isn’t a time to catch fish and, Master, we were out all night and didn’t catch anything. But if you will it, out of politeness to this local celebrity, I will take you out.” And, he cast out his nets and Peter (Simon, at this point) was humbled by what happened next.

They threw the nets out and the catch was so great that the nets were carried; so he called in his friends. Simon called in his partners, James and John, and the sons of Zebedee, to come out and help haul in the fish, and they filled up the boats so full that they were sinking. And Peter, the first throughout the Gospel stories who recognized who Jesus was, understanding what was happening, said, Go away from me, for I am a sinful man.” He recognized the holiness and power of Jesus.

You know the prophets, Nehemiah and Isaiah — their prophesy came around Jerusalem and the fall of the Temple. The Temple was where we understood that God’s presence was. But something new had happened: Isaiah had a vision where he was brought before the throne room of God in Heaven. But Simon was encountering Immanuel — “God with Us” — the incarnation of the Living God in a human being. God’s presence, they had understood, was restricted with this Holy of Holies — where they treated very carefully; and, now something had changed. The presence of God was walking among them and Peter was terrified by it.

Jesus said to him, “Don’t be afraid. This reality that you’ve been living in — this everyday life that perhaps you haven’t given much thought to — perhaps you’ve thought this was your life and all it was ever going to be. There is a new plane of existence crossing right in this moment, Simon. You are about to enter the Kingdom of God. Come with me, and you are going to be fishers of men.”

And they did. They left their boats behind. They left their nets, and they started following, and they watched as Jesus healed, and taught, and proclaimed that the reign of God is here. Turn and enter into this. God’s power is here, among us.

And, he sent them — he sent them out to be vessels of the Kingdom of God wherever they went — and they were. They went out to new towns and preached the news and healed; and, they were part of God’s work, bringing the Kingdom of God everywhere they went.

We know, at the end of the story, this transformation of God from the Temple to Christ moved forward at Pentecost; and, each of these Disciples, and all who followed them — all who turned to Jesus Christ — received the gift of the Holy Spirit, indwelling of the presence of God. So, each of them were given an opportunity, and each of us today are these vessels, called to follow God, and sent out to bring the peace and reconciliation; the love, the justice, the hope of the Kingdom of Heaven, wherever we go.

I was sharing with the kids earlier about my early call — my sense of God’s leading me into ministry — and the obvious question: Isaiah had a vision. Peter had a giant boatload of fish. How do we know? How do we recognize when God is calling us?

And, I just want to share with you some of the times in my life where I have been led. I shared with the kids — with all of us — about being led from seven years old, with that

strange question that came into my mind one morning, as I woke up: “Why don’t you become a pastor?”

It was a novel idea. Other novel ideas happened throughout my life in similar ways. As I got older, I had a question while I was serving at a Christian camp. I woke up early one morning about 5:00 a.m. — right at dawn — with a question: “Why can’t a pastor marry a doctor?” [Laughter.] And, I got up, with this idea puzzling in my mind. I went out on the deck and sat, and watched the sun rise and contemplated this novel idea in me.

My counterpart was much slower to come to that realization. [Laughter.] In fact, along the same lines of that, later, as I was graduating from seminary, Tracy and I had been dating for a while, broke up and we were no longer together. At the same time, a friend of mine from Tokyo, had come to California as a high school student. He was in my Sunday School class and became one of my best friends.

He went to college with me for a while and, then, he went back to Japan, when he couldn’t find work here in the United States. He was working there and attending a church called Tokyo Union Church, and he called me up and said, “Bill, we are looking for an associate pastor. Would you be interested in applying?”

And I thought, “Well, I’m a free man. [Laughter.] I can leave the continent.” And, I applied and they flew me out there, and I was amazed. I had no idea what to expect — what Japan would be [like].

Here I was, in the heart of Tokyo, touring with these members of the church for a week. It was a marvel, but there was also just this sense this inward sense of peace: This is right. This is the right place for me.

I had no idea that I would be called out of the country — no aspiration for it — just out of the blue.

Years later, after Tracy and I eventually got married — that is not a bit of a secret [laughter] — we went to Dallas to finish her training as an Intensive Care Doctor. I was looking at churches there to serve as a Presbyterian pastor and I interviewed in a suburb on the southern side called Duncanville. And [as] part of that interviewing, they had me meet with the pastors from the local presbytery to review me, to see if I was OK enough to enter the presbytery.

One of them said to me, “Have you thought about applying at Glendale?” after talking to me and hearing about my race relations work; and, I hadn’t thought about it. Glendale was an almost entirely African-American Church. It never dawned on me that they would have any interest in me as a pastor — but he encouraged me to apply, so I applied, and I went. As I was driving around the neighborhood, I was inspired. I was *moved* and I met with them. This little church had been seeking a pastor for a while and, breaking with much of Presbyterian polity, they offered me the job at the end of the interview. [Laughter.] [They] said, “Would you be our Pastor?” And, I said “yes.”

A little while after that, Tracy and I were asked — I have shared with the congregation before — we were asked if we would be interested adopting. Tracy’s cousin had been found

with child, and could not raise a child, and the child was going to enter the foster system for adoption. The adoption agency, or the state agency person, asked us, “Well, yes. This child will likely go into the adoption system to be adopted, unless you guys would like to adopt her. Why don’t you let us know by tomorrow?” [Laughter.]

We were not looking to adopt a child. We had a ten-month-old, colicky baby [laughter] and we had a day. I remember, we were eating dinner together. Tracy and I said, “Let’s see how we feel tomorrow,” and as we kind of rested on it and thought on it, both of us had this sense that, “Yes. This is what we were supposed to do.”

Again, this pattern throughout my life. They were not things we were looking for necessarily, but it doesn’t mean that God can’t call us in ways that we aren’t looking for it; but throughout these strange intersections of my life, perhaps a little bit like Peter. Peter was struggling with this bad day at work and the Kingdom of God broke open in his midst and invited him along.

My calls after that, as I look at my life experiences, were varied; some of them were powerful. Earlier, when I was called to be a stay-at-home dad, when I was on my honeymoon. We were coming out of a great restaurant and driving back to our hotel, and just the thought came to mind: “Why don’t I stay at home? My wife is a doctor. When she has a position, I could just stay at home and raise the kids.” I wasn’t looking for that, but that’s what God led me into and God blessed me through that.

God worked in that, later, as I was finishing this time of being a stay-at-home parent, I was beginning to yearn to do something outside of my home. I was at family camp at Calvin Crest — the camp that I have been working with — and something welled up inside of me: this desire to be of service there; to be bringing the MBA that I had been studying for service to them. That one was so powerful inside of me, that I felt like it was bursting out of me. I couldn’t wait for the speaker time to end, so I could go out in the forest and be alone with the overwhelming emotions that I had.

But, other times it was not. God’s leading — sometimes is [so]powerful and unshakable and unavoidable, we can’t help but notice — and other times it is quiet. Sometimes it’s through the mouths of other people, like my friend the pastor of the neighboring town, who suggested, “I think you may be the right pastor for this black church next door.”

God calls all of us. This invitation that Jesus gave to Peter is recorded here, in part, because it is *our* story. Like the Hebrews were instructed when they told their kids about Passover, “Tell it like it is you. Tell it like you are the ones being brought out of Egypt,

So, we too, when we hear these stories [of] God calling Simon, they are our stories.” This is the way God calls us. Each of us has been invited into this ministry of bringing the Kingdom of God into our world. Collectively, as a Church body, we come together, and we bring the Kingdom of God into Des Moines and, individually, everywhere we go, we bare the Spirit of God. We are ambassadors of God’s reign, and each place we go, and [from] the challenge of our families, our homes, to our workplace, to the streets we travel, to the political world, to everything that we do, we bring the reign of God through our hearts.

Amen.