

“Called by God”  
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, VA  
4<sup>th</sup> Epiphany – January 31, 2010  
Jeremiah 1:4-10

What’s it like to be called by God?

Unexpected. In the Bible, ordinary people, minding their own business, suddenly hear a voice or see a vision or notice a bush blazing away in flame. Moses was tending sheep. Samuel was sleeping. Paul was on the road to Damascus. The disciples were fishing when Jesus showed up and asked them to come along.

Many calls are dramatic, like the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary or Isaiah’s vision of God on a throne. Some are a bit more gentle, like Samuel’s – even though he heard a voice, he thought that voice was Eli’s, and it took Eli to tell him how to listen to God’s call.

But none of these people in our scriptural stories were looking for God’s call. It just came to them, without warning, breaking in on their daily lives, surprising them, waking them up, demanding their attention. God’s call was inconvenient, and yet so many of them responded, “Here am I.” It will never cease to amaze me that the disciples simply left their nets of fish and followed Jesus without a backward glance. I’ve often wondered if I could do that.

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Scary. Both God and angels say, “Fear not. Do not be afraid,” when they appear to mortals. Moses covers his face and hides. Isaiah describes a scene of God on a throne with seraphim flying around singing with voices that shake the thresholds and smoke that fills the room. “Woe is me!” he cries out.

Even when the scene of the call itself isn’t so frightening, the person called is frequently given a fearful message to share or a difficult task to undertake. Samuel must tell Eli that his house will be punished because of the blasphemy of his sons. Moses must confront Pharaoh and demand that he allow the Israelites to leave Egypt. Saul must give up his old life, in which he persecuted the followers of Jesus and take up a new name and life in which he proclaims the good news of Christ to Jews and Gentiles alike.

When God comes calling, chances are, we’re going to be asked to change our plans, leave our comfort zones, do something new and potentially frightening. It’s hard not to resist. And yet, so many have said, “Here am I,” and answered the call, no matter how frightened they may have been or how much their lives needed to change in order to answer.

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Humbling. In a number of the biblical stories, the person being called protests and complains of inadequacy. Moses says that he’s no good at public speaking. Isaiah cries out that he is a man of unclean lips. Jeremiah says, “I do not know how to speak for I am only a boy.”

When God calls, people feel inadequate or unworthy of the call. They don't feel that they have the right skills or gifts to carry out what God asks them to do. It's so easy to resist God's call due to these doubts and reservations. It's so easy to think that we aren't good enough or articulate enough or old enough or young enough or patient enough or brave enough or wise enough or just plain enough. It's so easy to run away from God's call and to make ourselves believe that God really isn't calling us at all.

And yet, when God calls us, God gives us what we need to answer the call.

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Empowering. God gives Moses a staff that will turn into a snake and a brother who will speak for him. God says to Jeremiah, "Do not be afraid for I am with you to deliver you." Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to inspire the disciples after he has left them. God equips God's servants to carry out their calls, even when they doubt their own abilities. God says to Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you." Wow! What an amazing thought, that God knew us before we were formed in the womb. God knows everything about us, especially the extraordinary things we are capable of, if we will only trust and answer the call. God has blessed us with everything we need already.

You might have noticed that during this sermon I've been making the shift from the call stories in the Bible to speaking about us. In the Bible, we mostly hear about the dramatic call stories with voices and visions and flaming shrubs. Not all calls come that way, though. Sometimes God calls

to us through a small inner voice that we hear deep inside of us. Sometimes God calls to us through other people or through books or classes.

Sometimes God calls to us in our dreams. Sometimes God calls to us when we are worshiping or praying, but God also calls when we're in the shower or driving to work. Sometimes what we hear is so quiet that we have to be quite still in order to hear. Sometimes the call is easy to ignore, and sometimes it seems to be hammering away at us until we say, "Enough. Here am I, God. What is your will for me?"

In the biblical call stories it also seems like the call is clear. Moses has to lead the people out of Egypt. Isaiah and Jeremiah are to become prophets. Mary will give birth to Jesus. Each person knows what she or he is saying "yes" to. Sometimes people today hear calls that clearly, but for most of us it takes some discernment. We talk to friends or family members, spiritual directors or priests. We pray and reflect, perhaps journal about it or think while we exercise. We make some space in our lives so that we can listen. Or we don't. Sometimes we're simply too busy or distracted to listen for the call. Or we might not want to hear the call because we know it will change us.

I believe that God is calling all of us. Each one of us here. Just because Michael and I have discerned that we are called to ordained ministry doesn't mean we get to stop listening. God continues to call us to new ways of being priests. So too God is calling every one of you. The call may not be dramatic. But it's there. God has work for you. God has given you gifts to use. There are a million different ways to be called. And not just individually, but collectively, too.

I believe that God is calling Hickory Neck Church to something new. Not with a burning bush or flying seraphim, but calling nonetheless. When God calls groups of people, like churches, then it takes the group to discern the call. I believe that the cards Michael asked us to fill out at the annual meeting are part of that discernment. In preparation for the vestry retreat, we've been reading and rereading those comments, listening for where God is calling us. In those comments I hear some individual calls, some of us longing for God to use us, but I also hear the stirrings of a call to Hickory Neck Church. If I were to guess, I would say it has something to do with moving out into our community, perhaps through outreach, perhaps through evangelism, perhaps through advocacy, perhaps in some way I can't even imagine. Whatever the call might be, though it could be unexpected, scary, or humbling, I know that God will empower us to carry it out.

What's it like to be called by God? Pay attention sisters and brothers.

We're about to find out!