

Sermon on John 1:43-51  
Second Sunday after the Epiphany, January 14, 2018  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

Today's scripture focuses our thoughts on the *call from God*. This call always comes as an *invitation* – though it can have such direct language that it sounds like a “command”, and it always comes with a “challenge”. Like the invitation we heard last Sunday to “*take the plunge*” – to “jump into” the waters of baptism, challenges us when we consider how cold or deep those waters might be. That's because discipleship is always a challenge for us – following Jesus in the path of God takes us out of ourselves and our comfort zones. I personally “shudder” at the thought of a “polar plunge” today! So we have to consider that, and “deal with it” if we accept Jesus' invitation.

Today the invitation comes in Jesus' words: “*come and see*”. There is a challenge here as well! You and I are invited by Jesus, along with Andrew, Philip, and Nathanael, Mary Magdalene and all the disciples back then and ever since, to *come and see* all that he has to show us about the path of God, following his lead. But in order to *come* along we have to get up out of our chairs and follow, and in order to *see* we have to open our eyes. And we also have to open our ears and *listen*, as Jesus invites us to “see and hear”! Not only to what the Bible says in words of scripture, but also what we see and hear out in that cold, cruel world into which Jesus leads us – hearing our neighbor's story and seeing what others experience in their lives. The challenge is that we can be slow to get up, and we may not seek to listen or look. Even more challenging is when we do not *understand, hear or see* what Jesus is teaching us, or what our neighbors try to show or tell us. Too often we can be deaf or blind to the truth of God – or our neighbor's need.

So in our first lesson, we see a boy named Samuel, sleeping in the Temple, serving under a priest named Eli, taking care of the lamp of God. He heard a voice call his name three times in the night – each time he went to Eli to ask why he had called him. He didn't recognize God's voice in the night. Most of us wouldn't! After the second time, Eli had an idea that it was God's voice. So he advised Samuel the next time he heard God's voice to say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening”. When the Lord called his name in the night, Samuel answered and heard the voice of God calling him. It was a challenging mission that God gave to Samuel. At first Samuel was afraid to tell Eli about it, because it meant judgment upon Eli and his house. But Samuel said “*Here I am, speak Lord, for your servant is listening*”. So as Samuel grew, he became a trustworthy prophet of God.

Then there was Nathanael, in the gospel. After Philip had met Jesus, he approached Nathanael, all excited, saying “We have found the one about whom Moses and the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” He was “pumped”, and so wanted to tell his friend, sitting under a fig tree in the shade. But Nathanael looked up from his smart phone with a snarky, sarcastic response: “*Can anything good come out of Nazareth,*” that hick town in the hills of Galilee?

I thought of the irony of this question, as we heard the president crudely ask last week, when discussing immigration from Haiti, Latin America or Africa, “can anything good come out of s\*\*\*hole countries in Africa?” Why not from Norway, Sweden, or some other country that offers something? But I digress....

Well, Philip challenged Nathanael to “come and see” for yourself! So Nathanael got up and went with Philip to meet Jesus. Jesus greeted him by saying he was someone who could be trusted, “in whom there was no deceit”. He had seen Nathanael under the fig tree. We don’t know what moved Nathanael to faith, but then and there he said, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God” and followed him. Jesus promised him, “*You will see greater things than these!*” I’m sure he did!

In his book *Stride Toward Freedom*, Martin Luther King Jr. describes an “epiphany-induced” change, in what is called his “vision in the kitchen”. It happened in 1956, when he was but 27 years old, one month into the Montgomery bus boycott, which made the young pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church the object of many death threats – 30 to 40 calls a day. He had just been arrested himself, and spent time in the local jail. He was discouraged, and had offered his resignation to the pastors’ group leading the boycott. Later, King wrote:

*“I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me, I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud.*

*The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. “I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they, too, will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.*

*At that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced God before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: “Stand up for justice, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.” Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.” [MLK Jr, *Stride Toward Freedom*]*

The death threats, however, didn’t stop. A few days later, a bomb exploded on the front steps of the parsonage, while his family slept. But despite the threats,

the challenges and doubts, Martin Luther King continued his work of racial reconciliation and civil rights, until the day he was killed by a sniper's bullet in Memphis, in 1968. Even though he didn't ride the bus in Montgomery, he risked his life to make sure that African Americans could sit in anywhere they chose in a city bus, for the right to vote, attend any school, and to live in any home they could afford. Some of these hard-fought victories are at risk today, 50 years later.

Friends, you and I may not have an experience of hearing God's voice in person, in the kitchen, in our sleep, or in our prayers, like Samuel did, like Nathanael did, or the apostle Paul, or Martin Luther King. But the invitation of God in Christ Jesus comes regardless, in the words of scripture that we hear, in the testimony and stories of our neighbors, and the evidence we see and hear, in what we and others experience in the world around us.

So here's the question, along with the challenges that comes with the invitation: *what is Jesus calling you to do? What is God showing you in what you see and hear around you?* It's seldom so dramatic as those encounters we read about in scripture, like Moses encountering God in a burning bush in the desert, Jesus calling his disciples, or Martin Luther King hearing God's voice over coffee in his kitchen. Maybe most of our calls from God happen when we are reflecting on what we have seen and heard in our lives, in what happens around us in the world, or in our conversations with other people. From many conversations that we finally put together, and see as a call from God much later, in retrospect.

I remember how my first "call from God" came from a pastor I once worked with when I was in my twenties. In a conversation I had with Paul Fransen, sitting at a picnic table outside on a lovely fall day at Luther Seminary, 35 years ago, he asked me if I would consider seminary studies. Was it the sunshine on a beautiful day, or a call from God? I don't know, but I decided then to give it a try, and here I am! Send me!

Another conversation was more recent. It was a little over a year ago, on November 22, 2016, after the election. I was having a cup of coffee with Pastor Grant Stevensen in Redeemer's kitchen, before an Isaiah meeting in the undercroft. Grant asked me if I would take the lead, and host a press conference here at Redeemer where churches and synagogues would declare sanctuary for undocumented immigrants and refugees, who all of a sudden were terrified of being detained, deported and separated from their families. I asked if I would have time to think about it, or meet the next week with the Vestry. He said no, he had to know that night, because the press conference had to happen the next week. So I said a silent prayer, went around the room and asked the Redeemer members who were there, from our Core Team, if they would support such a move on our part. Every person said yes. So I went back to Grant and said "Yes, I will be the point of the spear, and Redeemer will host." And so the Minnesota Sanctuary Network

was born that night, and last week our brother Michael shared with 1,000 listeners at the Basilica of St. Mary in Minneapolis how we saved his life, by protecting him until he could get his work visa renewed – because deportation back to Tanzania would be the end of his life. Was it a proposition by Grant Stevensen, or a call from God? Actually, it was both! Sure, Grant is only a man, but calls from God usually come through human beings! And I learned that this was a challenge that would bear fruit.

Because then Michael came to us, frightened, alone and in despair, with nowhere else to go except to us! And all we had was a bare choir room, a cot, a curtain – and faith!. This is how our sister Stephanie received her call from God, by the way! Stephanie committed to help us with sanctuary, not sure why, but because she felt compassion for others living in fear. And then she met Michael, and she was convinced. She did the work to make sure we always had hosts staying here with Michael, our guest. Six months later, Michael received his work visa, and was now free from fear, free to work, and to rent his own apartment. And now you know the story. Was this encounter a call from God?

What's your story? Do you have a story, an encounter with another human being, that you would consider a "call from God?" We don't usually know that is what has happened until much later, when we look back and reflect upon the episode – sometimes years later. It often isn't so dramatic – or so it seems to us. Because most of our calls from God aren't to lead a civil rights movement, or lead our people from slavery into freedom. Most of us are called to do the right thing for our families, or to forgive someone who has done us wrong, to extend a helping hand to someone or other people in need, which doesn't seem so "heroic" to us.

We live today in challenging, scary times in America. We hear stories every day of hateful words that cause fear among our neighbors –immigrants, refugees, the undocumented, especially people of color who have gone through so much already. Sometimes these hateful words come from our own elected leaders, the White House, and others in authority – which only makes the fear worse. I believe strongly that *God is calling the Church today, and all people of faith – Christian, Jew, Muslim and others – to step up and speak out for love, for truth, for justice, and reconciliation.* We cannot go back to the days of Jim Crow laws, when the Ku Klux Klan had power, or when Nazis were considered patriots – very fine people.

But today we hear the call from our Lord Jesus. God's call is simply to follow Jesus on a path of faith. We don't know where it leads. But we know it will bring us challenges. We simply have to trust that the path leads us to life, here on earth and for eternity. So today we pray that we will keep our eyes and ears open to God's call, so that we, too, will "*come and see*" what things God has in store for us. Let us always be open to God's invitation to follow Jesus, who came to set us all free from whatever holds us in chains, and lead us all to life!