

## THE CALL OF GOD

a sermon preached by the Reverend Dr. Tom Collins  
Santee (SC) Presbyterian Church  
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Numbers 11:16—25 Isaiah 6:1-8 Luke 5:27-28

One of the great themes of the Bible is how God calls men and women. You may not agree with me on this, but I'm convinced that a call from God is a bit different from God speaking to us. God can speak to us often, for example, in our prayer life, but when God calls us, it always means we are put into action. A call dictates that we must do something, that we must take a new journey, and that we must rearrange our priorities. A call from God suggests that once we were moving in one direction and now we are going in new direction.

The Bible is replete with stories of those who answered God's call, and, in some cases, it tells the story of those who ran away from the call of God. Think of the rich young ruler or Simon Magus or the prime example, Judas Iscariot. They either didn't hear God's call or they ignored it.

And then there are all those who heard God's call. It's as though God was tugging on their hearts: Peter, Paul, Joseph in the Old Testament, Joseph in the New Testament, Mary, Barnabas (the encourager), Abraham, Noah, Jonah, Samuel, and so many others. Somehow God pulled them into a new future with a new hope and a completely new beginning. I love to explore how this happens in the Bible, but, more important, how it happens to us today. What does it mean to pursue a valid call from God? I've lifted up three biblical examples --- all quite different --- of men (and they are all men, at least for today) who responded to God's call on their lives.

First, there is Moses in Numbers 11. The book of Numbers is so named because it involves a counting of heads, a census, of the Jews as they trek through the desert toward the Promised Land. But much more happens in Numbers than just taking a census. Most of the Israelites --- and there are thousands of them --- complain about their lot. They tend not to complain to God who has freed them; they complain to their poor old prophet, Moses.

This is what the Israelites said: "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic: but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to eat." (Nu 11:4-6) Moses can't take this crying, whining people anymore. He prays to God, "Why have I not found favor in your sight? Did I conceive all this people? Where am I to get meat for them to eat? I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me." (Num 11:11-14)

You've probably heard the old saying, "God never asks us to do anything unless he gives us the strength to do it." I believe that, but you'd have a hard time convincing Moses of that!

So what God does is spread out his spirit. God recognizes that the burden is too great for Moses, and the same spirit he gave Moses, he now shares with seventy elders. You may find this hard to believe, but that same spirit, given today over 3,000 years later, will be shared with Ron and Linda in just a few moments when they are ordained.

But this is the important thing to know: the spirit of God shared with others does not diminish its power with you. Dividing the spirit so it is shared with us today doesn't lessen its effectiveness. The spirit of God is just as powerful today as it was 3,000 years ago. Moses is no less prophetic because 70 other Israelites have been entrusted with God's spirit. His call from God was just as valid as it ever was. And of course he will lead them to the Promised Land, although he himself will never enter it.

Our second story is about Isaiah. Isaiah's call from God comes to him through a mystical experience. It happens in the temple in Jerusalem, in the very same year his beloved King Uzziah died, no less as a leper.

We call this a mystical experience because only Isaiah saw and heard the Lord that day. If you were seated next to Isaiah, you would have simply experienced a normal day of worship. Isaiah sees what no one else sees, angels called seraphs, winged creatures. In the presence of God, Isaiah feels profoundly unworthy. He cries out, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live in the midst of an unclean people, yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts." (vs 5) And a seraph flies over to Isaiah with a burning coal and cauterizes his lips, symbolically cleansing them and him so he can now speak for God. His God asks, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" (vs8) Isaiah replies, "Here am I!" Send me!" (vs 8) which of course is the biblical inspiration for today's opening hymn ("Here I Am, Lord"). Isaiah is then spat out of the temple to spend the next forty years serving as a prophet for God, and no one listens to a word he says!

If you think about it, this could get depressing, this business of answering the call of God. Moses doesn't want to carry the people of Israel. He wants to die, and he asks the Lord to take him. (Nu 11:15) He is that depressed. Isaiah willingly accepts the call to prophecy, but lives a defeated life. He is faithful to God and to his call, but no college or university is going to award him an honorary degree and no city will proclaim him "citizen of the year." I need to tell you this. "Success" is not a theological word. "Faithfulness" is. Measuring success in discipleship is meaningless.

But let me turn to a third call, one briefly recorded in only two verses, the call of Levi who in all likelihood was the same man we know as Matthew, the writer of the gospel.

Levi's call is quite different from that of Moses or Isaiah because it comes from a real human being. Levi actually hears a human voice, the voice of Jesus, who says, "Follow me." (Lk 5:27) Just two words! And just like that this hated tax collector "left everything" (those are the Bible's words). He surrenders everything --- his wife, his income, his security, his family --- to follow Jesus.

*Here's an axiom of a call from God.* On Christmas Eve I made the point that what makes a gift a gift is not so much that it is *given*, but that it is *accepted*.

What make a call a call is not so much that it is *extended*, but that it is *answered*. How many other times did Jesus call apostles and disciples, but they simply walked away? How many shepherds heard the call to go to the baby Jesus, but they didn't answer the call? Did God appear to a woman named Joanna or Eunice or Deborah before Mary accepted the call to be the mother of Jesus? What makes a call a call is our willingness to accept it.

*And here's a second axiom of answering a call.* There always seems to be a sense of unworthiness in answering a call from God, a feeling that I am not good enough to be a prophet or apostle or a teaching elder or ruling elder or deacon or a Sunday School teacher. Like Isaiah, we say, "Woe am I! I am lost, for I am a man [or woman] of unclean lips and I live in the midst of an unclean people."

People have said to me when I have asked them to serve as an officer, "I can't be an elder (or deacon). I'm not good enough." I always reply, "You're right! But God can use you anyway." God's not looking for perfection; he's looking for someone who is being sanctified, or, as the bumper sticker says, "I'm not perfect, just forgiven."

The joy of answering a call from God is that God works through our weakness or, as Paul says, "When I am weak, I am strong." (II Cor. 12:10) When you answer God's call, and God is calling each one of us for some special purpose, God's grace will show itself even through all our inadequacies.