

## *Life as a Response to God*

Genesis 12:1-5, Exodus 3:1-10, Mark 1:16-20, Acts 16:6-10

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In Monday's *New York Times* [8-2-10], David Brooks had a column on the well-planned life vs. the summoned life. He reflected on a commencement address by one Christian teacher of econometrics in which he talked about taking an hour a day when he was a Rhodes Scholar to think about God's purpose for his life. He discovered that purpose and proceeded to plan the rest of his life accordingly. Brooks suggests that another model is the "summoned" life, which sees life less as a project than as an unknowable landscape to be explored. We really can't plan our lives—we just don't know enough, or know ourselves enough—but we make certain commitments and then circumstances summon us to a certain kind of life when we are seeking to be useful.

Both of those approaches are useful, and better than the "unexamined life" that most people live. But I want to suggest this morning an alternative that seems more true to the stories of people in the Bible. The Christian way of thinking about our lives is not that we plan them out in advance, or that we are summoned by circumstances, but that we are summoned by God in the midst of circumstances. We live our lives in response to a call from God, or a series of call experiences. The framework for thinking about our lives is not a life plan that we lay out for ourselves but our experience of being summoned by God to something beyond ourselves.

Two caveats to start with. First, the word "calling" and its Latin twin "vocation" have been distorted by two misunderstandings in the modern world. They are either secularized into the idea of career, or they are thought of as applying only to religious vocations [*"The Meaning of Vocation,"* A.J. Conyers, *Christian Reflection*, The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2004]. Before the Enlightenment—in which reason replaced the idea of calling—it was understood that a vocation was not chosen but given. God called you to a life—whether you were a shepherd or a king, a martyr or a rich man. The summons was external to the person being called. It wasn't just fatalism; you could choose to respond to God's call or not. But there was no sense that a person could just sit down with a sheet of paper listing pros and cons and make a decision about a vocation. It was a God thing.

The second caveat is this: In the New Testament, the word "calling" almost always means something broader, our calling to salvation and life in Christ. Christians are referred to as "those who are called," "those who are called according to God's purpose," and "those called to be saints." Ephesians 4:4 says "you were called to one hope when you were called" and a few verses earlier Paul says "I urge you to live a life worthy of your calling"—that is, a life that fits with your calling to be part of God's people and a follower of Jesus. So our first calling is the calling into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. But what we are talking about today is that particular calling that you have to a particular shape of life in a particular place.

Typical Christian advice about how to discover your calling is to ask yourself three questions: What do I like to do? What am I good at? and What needs to be done? Where those three things meet is your sweet spot [Andy Fleming, Center for Ethics, Emory University, cited by Joanna Adams, Morningside Presbyterian Church, 8-28-05]. I myself have given advice like that. But I don't think that's taking seriously the idea that God is calling us and that a sense of purpose comes through an encounter with the divine. We read four brief accounts of call stories from the Bible and all of them illustrate a way of thinking about your life that is different from sitting down and making a plan based on what you like and are good at and what needs to be done.

The call of Abraham is the foundational story of God's relationship to humankind, establishing the pattern of call, promise, and journey. Abraham was called by a voice outside himself to leave everything that was familiar to him and set out into the unknown with only God to guide him. The author of the letter to the Hebrews says "he set out, not knowing where he was going" (11:8). Our pattern is to journey from the unknown to the known, to go to the place we know, to function in our area of expertise. But God may call us in the other direction. Often in the Bible the response of the one called is something like "Who me?" The call may be contrary to the will of the person called. It may not seem to be in line with the person's gifts. But it is a compelling sense of oughtness that comes from outside ourselves. The call is almost always a call to some kind of hardship and a call to a journey, and the greatest danger is not that we will resist the call entirely but that we will be distracted from the call. Both the Bible and literature are full of stories of the hero called to a great task. Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings* is one called to bear the ring of power and destroy it, and he is tempted to use the calling for his own benefit, but he is also tempted to pursue other tasks and get distracted from his primary calling.

Thinking about your calling is not just for the young. When Abraham was called to leave home and start a new nation, he was 75. When Moses received his calling at the burning bush he was about 80. Both of them had lives before that. It might be that they had other callings. But God called them to something specific when the time was right and they had the life experience to prepare them for something really outrageous. The Christian idea of vocation has no room for the idea of retirement. You can't retire from responding to God. You can't retire from listening for what God wants you to do next.

Moses hears God calling him from a burning bush. God tells him that he is aware of a need in the world; he has heard the Israelite slaves crying out to him about their oppression. God is going to do something about it. No doubt Moses was happy to hear that. Good for God. But then God says "I am calling you to go to Pharaoh and lead the people out of slavery." Moses insists that God has the wrong guy, but as readers of Exodus we can see a certain logic to it. Moses has an Egyptian education; he has contacts in high places; he has a passion for justice that got him in trouble. His whole life has been preparation for this; he just can't see it. In fact, Moses had given up on his life. Because of a bad choice he made by killing a man, his life had gotten derailed, and he wound up in the desert of Midian tending sheep with all his education. He had settled for that, made peace with his lot, married a local girl and worked for her dad—for 40 years. Then along comes God and says I have another job for you.

What I'm telling you is that even if you have gotten derailed, even if you have settled for something less, even if a marriage led you to give up your dream, it can still happen that God will show up and call you to something great. One thing the Bible demonstrates over and over is that you never know who God will use. God seems to like to use rascals and freaks rather than the winners of the world. You never know what God might want to do with you.

Julie Pennington-Russell was the pastor to Becca's family in Waco, Texas. She tells a story about a man who came into the church there who was in his late 60's. He looked like the Marlboro man, but he had an Ivy League education before he came to Texas for grad school and got into cocaine. He lost his career and his family but somehow in his 60's wound up at a good church and he began to heal, even reuniting with his wife and family. Julie and her husband had this couple over for dinner. He said, "I want to believe that my best days aren't behind me, and that my life can still count, can still make a difference for God." He sat at the table with his head in his hands. "I just can't help but feel like I've blown all of my best chances." That's when his wife, a middle-aged Texas flower-child, reached over and took his hand and said, "Baby, you've got to take your sticky fingers off that steering wheel. If God could yank Jesus out of the grave, I figure he can make something beautiful out of busted parts"

[[day1.org/1109-our\\_first\\_calling](http://day1.org/1109-our_first_calling)].

In Mark 1 we have the story of Jesus calling the first disciples. They are fishermen. You know fishermen—not people who fish for fun, but people who fish to make a living. They are not the most

likely people to get religion. They already had careers, jobs they learned from their fathers. They stood there in their boats, casting their nets, working just to survive, and along comes Jesus as the unexpected presence of God in their lives. “Follow me,” Jesus says. “I’ll show you how to fish for people.” What the heck could that mean? Those fisherman could have had no idea. But there is something about Jesus, something about his authority, something about his promise of a new kind of life that leads these burly guys to drop their nets, leave their boats and their fathers and follow him.

That’s what the gospel is about—not just for Bible characters or preachers but for everyone who wants to know real life. It’s about following Jesus, about responding to his calling. Bob Dylan wrote about his experience this way: “Jesus tapped me on the shoulder and said, Bob, why are you resisting me? I said, I’m not resisting you. He said, You gonna follow me? I said, I’ve never thought about that before! He said, When you’re not following me, you’re resisting me.”

Did you somehow get the idea that being a Christian is just about believing in him, just acknowledging that Jesus existed, or maybe that he died and rose. As his brother James put it, “The demons believe and tremble.” It’s not about believing in a fact. It’s about responding to his call to a new life, trusting him to take you to a place you have never known before. It’s about following him wherever he leads.

You probably know the story of how Paul was first called by Jesus on the road to Damascus, how Jesus appeared to this Pharisee who was out to arrest Christians in a blinding light and turned his life around. But the call story I had Bill read about Paul was from Acts 16, several years into his missionary work. Paul had developed a strategic plan for getting the story of Jesus out. He thought he was supposed to go to the Roman region of modern-day Turkey called “Asia” but Luke says the Holy Spirit told him No. Then Paul decided to go with Plan B, into another region called Bythynia, but this time the Spirit of Jesus said No. The great British preacher G. Campbell Morgan pointed out in 1924 [*The Acts of the Apostles*, Fleming Revell] that Luke wrote this story many years later and said that it was the Spirit and Jesus that stopped Paul, but at the time that it was happening all Paul knew was that he was unable to go where he wanted to go. For Paul this was nothing but a closed door.

But then Paul had a dream and God spoke to him: he saw a man from Macedonia, across the water in Europe, pleading with him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us!” When he woke up, Paul was convinced that God was calling him to go over to Europe and preach the message of Jesus. If Paul had not had that dream, who knows if those of us of European descent would even be here this morning? So God spoke through a dream, but God also spoke through closed doors. G. Campbell Morgan said, “The Spirit is guiding us even when no voice is heard and no vision is seen. The Spirit is guiding us by the closed doors.” God may be calling you to something new through the experience of failure you are enduring at this moment.

Once I thought I was supposed to go to Asia. I was convinced for a while that I should leave Alabama where I was serving and go as a missionary to Japan. I had the background and the language. The need was great. But God closed that door, slammed it in my face, locked it tight. Years later I can say it was the Holy Spirit that said no, even though at the moment I yelled like David Ortiz at the umpire calling strikes yesterday. I thought it was a stupid mistake on the part of the mission board—and maybe on the part of God. But it seems perfectly clear now that it was not my calling; it was my mother’s calling I was trying to fulfill. Not long after that I received a call to move to New York City and serve at Columbia, and as soon as I got there I realized that my childhood in Tokyo had prepared me to live in Manhattan.

I don’t think anything in life is wasted. It’s all useful at some point. Nothing in life is wasted except for the time you spend ignoring God and what God is calling you to do. And even if you think you’ve wasted your life up to this point, the truth is that God can make use of all your failures and

detours for his purposes. If God can yank Jesus out of the grave, he can make something beautiful of your life.

God is not looking for someone perfect to send. Abraham was a pagan who was later so cowardly that let bad guys have his wife to save his skin. Moses was a murderer hiding in the desert. The fishermen Jesus called could be absolute bozos. Paul was the most self-righteous Jesus-hating fanatic there was. And it's not too late, at 60, 70, 80, whatever. Not too late to change or to respond to the call. It's not someone else God is looking for. It's you.

Annie Dillard says in her book *Holy the Firm* [Harper Collins, 1997] that "there is no one but us."

There is no one to send,  
nor a clean hand nor a pure heart  
on the face of the earth, nor in the earth, but only us,  
a generation comforting ourselves with the notion  
that we have come at an awkward time,  
that our innocent fathers are all dead as if innocence had ever been  
and our children busy and troubled,  
and we ourselves unfit, not yet ready  
having each of us chosen wrongly,  
made a false start, failed,  
yielded to impulse and the tangled comfort of pleasures,  
and grown exhausted unable to seek the thread, weak, and involved.  
But there is not one but us.  
There never has been.