

A Called Life

Isaiah 49:1-7

The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb God named me.

John 1:35-42

*When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them,
"What are you looking for?"*

The servant in Isaiah speaks of God calling him even before he was born, naming him even before his parents named him. This reminded me of a Buddhist *koan*, a little teaching designed to break through our conventional thinking so that we see reality: What was your face before you were born? I think the servant in Isaiah is pondering the same mystery. It is the spiritual core of our lives. We belong to life in a way that weaves purpose and meaning into the fabric of our being. Yet we each need to discover it for ourselves through spiritual awareness and ever-growing self-understanding in our relationship with God.

This is what we mean here in the Church of the Covenant when we talk about "call." Each of us is created by God to live out our lives for the sake of the world. Discipleship is our response to Jesus' call to follow him in living out of God's love. The Isaiah reading can lead us to meditate on our being called, named, and rooted in God's love for us, to be channels of God's loving purposes in the world.

John the Baptist tells his disciples that Jesus, who has just walked by, is the Lamb of God, the Messiah of God. Two of the disciples, presumably with John's blessing, follow Jesus. Jesus turns around and asks them, "What are you looking for?" They ask where he is staying and Jesus invites them to come and see. They linger with Jesus until late afternoon. Whatever happened in their time with Jesus, it compelled Andrew, one of John's disciples, to go get his brother Simon and bring him to meet Jesus. Jesus gives Simon a new name: Peter, literally meaning "rock." Call. Name. It's all part of this same thing—belonging to God in a deep and intimate way, and living out of God's loving purposes for the world through our uniqueness and gifts. Life IS vocation (literally "calling").

The spiritual journey is the life-long path of growing in our knowledge of being loved by and belonging to God, and discerning God's call, the leading of God's spirit in our lives. It is a journey of working with Jesus' question: What are you looking for?

Last Sunday evening I shared with the Covenant Members that, over a period of several months and in discussion with Kaye, I have decided to look toward retiring in two years when I turn 62. By retiring I do not mean quitting work! I do mean no longer being the minister of the Church of the Covenant. I do not mean leaving this faith community, but being part of it in a different way, as a Covenant Member, as long as I feel God is calling me to Covenant Membership from year to year. I am making this decision in order to focus more clearly on some of the things I need to do with my life, things to which I need to give more time and energy. You have always given your minister great freedom to live out his life on the basis of call, not fulfilling a job description. You recognize the spiritual reality that our "job descriptions" are written by God, and they are dynamic and ever-changing, even for the one who has the responsibilities of minister. Faithfulness to call is at the heart of our community. So this impending change, as I said to the Covenant Members, is really your fault!

After nearly 35 years in the profession of ministry, I feel the need to let go of some things in order to take hold of other things, to let my life be more completely given to what I feel most deeply called—writing, music, a more contemplative life, working with the Festival Center and Chrysalis, traveling some with Kaye to help her in her work for children. We have been in the process of transitioning from the half-century leadership of Bev Cosby, the founding minister of this community. We have been moving, I think, into a fresh awareness of ourselves as a community in the here and now. I would hope that our work together thus far has prepared us to seek the person God would send us as minister, someone who not only has a grasp of the different way we go about being the

church—and is foolish enough to get involved in it!—but is also perhaps younger and can bring fresh visions and energy to our community.

All of that, however, will be a matter for our discernment over the next two years. What I really wanted to talk about is this thing of living our lives on the basis of call. Call means living from the “inside out,” not on the basis of external expectations. Call has to do with our inward journey of touching, nurturing, and being attentive to our deepest life relationship—our relationship with God, the source of life itself. As we work with that, we grow in awareness of our own lives in God and in life, how we “fit in,” our unique place in the fabric of life. We begin to see our giftedness, that our lives are meant to bless the world, and that we have particular gifts that can express this blessing in specific ways to meet some need in our faith community and in the world. To live on the basis of call is different from the way society wants us to live. We are not cogs to be “fit into” the machinery of the society, or the church for that matter. We are, like the servant in Isaiah, servants of God and life, made to be channels of God’s redemptive love in the ways God is constantly calling us.

It is scarier to live our lives on the basis of call than to fit ourselves into society’s slots. You have to cultivate spiritual courage to continue to be open, searching, doubting, and being ready to go in new directions and sometimes against the grain of people’s expectations. To me this is what Jesus meant when he told would-be disciples that they must leave everything in order to follow him (Matt. 10:37-39; Luke 14:26-27). It is what he meant by “the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head (Luke 9:58).” But living by call is the most meaningful and fulfilling way to live our lives, because it is the most authentic way to live. It has to do with our very being, our authentic selves.

We are a community that works with all this stuff. We have been at it long enough to know that there is no formula, no way to package and sell it, as is popular today. It is not about a “method” or a “plan for your life” that promises sure-fire achievement and success. It is about a relationship that you already have, your relationship with God, and about making a commitment to live in such a way that you are better able to stay in touch with and live out of that relationship. It is about listening deeply to Jesus’ question: What are you looking for? That question is a wonderful gateway into the called life. What am I looking for? What is my deepest desire in life? What do I most want to do with this brief and precious life I have been given? How can I discover for myself what Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great Jewish scholar, wrote: “Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy”?

When I talked with the Covenant Members Sunday evening, I was a little nervous. How are they going to respond? Are they going to be angry with me? Are they going to be thrown into anxiety? Or worse, perhaps, are they going to feel great relief?! Well, the response was characteristic of us as an intentional spiritual community. What came through clearly was the affirmation of what I was sharing out of my life. There is the recognition that each of us, including and especially your minister, needs to be living our lives at this deeper level of call. And call changes, grows, shifts directions, all because it has to do with the spirit of the living God’s always falling afresh on us, leading us, calling us to follow and to trust. If we are to be and remain a community that lifts up the importance of call and encourages each other to live according to what we sense is God’s call in our lives, then we will always be in for times of change and shifting. In fact, that will be characteristic of our life as a community—change, movement, shifting, growing. Sometimes in our inward lives, sometimes in our outward lives. It’s a whole different way of being a spiritual community. It means not fitting people into a pre-fabricated structure that is more valued than people or God’s living spirit. It means letting our structure, or shape, be determined by God’s call in people’s lives and in our life as a community.

It may seem strange that I am giving a two-year notice of my retirement as minister. And yet, it is my sense that we need this period, not only to continue the work to which we are already giving ourselves, but to be spiritually aware of and open to God’s wisdom and leading. The next two years need to be for us as a community—Covenant Members, Community Members, all of us—a time of giving clearer attention to God, seeking prayerfully God’s wisdom and leading. We don’t know how things will unfold. Our job is to be aware, attentive, and open. We will plan to have times of reflecting and sharing together. Where are we as a spiritual

community? Who are we at this point in our life? What do we need to deepen and strengthen? What do we need to let go of and take hold of? What do we need to celebrate? I am planning to schedule periodic silent retreats, beginning during the upcoming Lenten season. These will be days when we can gather here, worship together, be together in silence, open to God's spirit and sharing with each other our insights and senses of God's leading. There will be other opportunities, as well, to listen together for God's call and to Jesus' question to us: What are you looking for?

May God bless us with patience, quiet listening, respectful sharing, the leading of the spirit, and the readiness and courage to follow, now and always.