

Call and the Spirit

Genesis 12:1-4a *So Abram went as the Lord had told him....*

John 3:1-17 *“The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it,
but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.
So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”*

We are a community of faith that tries to live its life on the basis of call. We try to take seriously and listen for God’s call in our own lives and in our life together. This is a different pattern of life than is promoted in our culture and often in the church itself. It means living from within, from that deep, quiet, listening center as individuals and as a community. It means a lot of listening—to scripture, to one another, to our own hearts, and to the needs of God’s world. We listen for God’s call that implants in us visions of something to be done for the world and ourselves as persons gifted to serve life.

Following call means going wherever it leads us. So, while call brings us the wonderful sense of life as purposeful and our own lives as having meaning and direction, following call also means that we really never know quite where we are going! We are on a journey that is only unfolded as we take each step as faithfully as we can. One thing is certain, though--if we choose this way of living, we are in for a challenging, adventurous, and joyful way of life. We experience our lives as part of the purpose and the mystery of God’s redemptive love for the world.

The whole of scripture can be read as the story of God’s call in people’s lives and their response or lack of response, their faithfulness or unfaithfulness to that call. Abram’s story is a kind of template for the life of call. Abram is no one special, has no special credentials. He is, in that sense, every person and any person. We don’t know whether Abram was a particularly “spiritual” person or not. We don’t know anything about him, except that God calls and Abram picks up and goes. He leaves family and homeland to go to this unknown “land that God will show him.” Responding to call involves leaving behind and going toward. Jesus came down the beach, called his first disciples to follow him, and immediately left their nets and boats and followed him [Mk. 1:14-20]. They neither knew where they were going nor thought to ask! All Jesus said was that he would make them fishers of people. What does that mean! They would only learn as they went. Living by call has both this unknown and unfolding sense about it.

God tells Abram that by responding to this call he will become a blessing to all people, to the world. How do we make our lives a blessing? By discerning, responding to, and following as faithfully as we can God’s call in our lives and our life as a community. If we are paying closer and closer attention to and listening for God’s call to us, then centering our lives in that call, we are doing the best thing for the world. I have long believed, and believe even more deeply since becoming part of this community, that if we are being faithful to who God has made us to be and what God gives us to do, this is the way God blesses the world, brings to the world what God wants. Not living out of deadening obligation, or guilt, or trying to be someone else, but waking up to our own unique lives within the flow of God’s purposes and love for the world.

Abram was seventy-five years old when all this happened! Doesn’t that say something to us? The life of call has no age limit. It has nothing to do with the amount of energy or strength we have. It is not hampered by our limitations but embraces them. Call has nothing to do with anything but being inwardly responsive to God throughout our lives and within the particular circumstances of each season of our lives. I have known many people in their 70s, 80s and beyond who have hunkered down, given up and grown rigid. Yet I have known others who are as alive as when they were young, but even more so and with a great deal more wisdom and insight. Paul wrote that “though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day [2 Cor. 4:16].” When we look at our lives in this way, Abram’s response to God’s call at age seventy-five is no big surprise.

It is here that I think of Nicodemus. He must be up in years himself. When Jesus tells him that we need to be born of both water (the womb) and spirit, or born from above, Nicodemus can't grasp it. How can an old person like me be born a second time? Can I go back to the womb and come out again? Nicodemus, you old literalist! Not the womb, of course. Born in our relationship with God through God's spirit. Coming alive not only in our bodies but in our spirits. To be fully human is to be both of the womb, or the earth, or however you want to put it, and of God's spirit. And to be people of the spirit means our lives are going to look and feel a whole lot like the wind. The spirit is like the wind—they are the same word in both Hebrew and Greek. You see the effects of the wind—branches swaying, clouds sailing across the sky, sometimes wind so strong that it breaks the trees and takes the shingles off your house. You may feel it on your face as a gentle summer breeze or a stinging winter gale. But you don't know where it's coming from or where it's going. The wind is always shifting, with no warning. "It is the same way with those who are born of the Spirit," says Jesus. Learn from the wind how to live as people of God's spirit.

If we take seriously this stuff about the life of call and the spirit, then we are in for an adventure. If we continue to let ourselves be shaped as a community centered on call and the spirit, then we will be in harmony with our history and originating vision. If we really work with it as a reality in each present circumstance and moment, we will have that curious sense of being at the same time firmly grounded and on a continuous journey, of knowing ourselves rooted in God's call and yet not really knowing where we are going. We find out only as we keep on the journey, paying close spiritual attention.

I shared with you recently that I am feeling led to retire as minister of the Church of the Covenant at the end of next year. This is in order to give myself more fully to the things I feel God is calling me to do with the rest of my life. I will no longer be the official spiritual leader but part of our community, offering my life and gifts. This is a shift in the wind. Last Sunday evening, the Covenant Members began the process of talking with one another about our deepest reflections, feelings, and insights around this change. One thing I shared was that I do not feel worried or anxious about us through all of this. Their response to my initial sharing of my decision confirmed that here is a group that understands that we are to live on the basis of God's call and spirit, and that this will always mean changes, shifts, movements. My lack of anxiety around all this has to do with being part of a community in which each person has made a commitment to working with her or his own life at this level of God's call and spirit. In this sense, I said, we are not a leader-centered community. The strength and vitality of our community lies not in one particular person but in each person and in our community together. As long as we continue to keep before ourselves the importance of call and the spirit as the forming center of our lives and our life together, we will continue to be the Church of the Covenant. However, if we collapse down around our fears, anxiousness, or desire to control things or keep them stationary, then we cease to be the Church of the Covenant.

Some brief closing comments about living by call and the spirit:

- Call has to do with the deepest, most central purpose of our life, what we feel we are on this earth to be and to do
- Call means discerning the gift or gifts God has given us that touch some need in the world around us or in our community of faith itself
- Living by call means learning the art of letting go of those things that are not part of our call in order to give ourselves more fully to what God is giving us to do. Many of us want to do too many things and we get ourselves over-extended. In the process we lose both the effectiveness and the joy of being faithful to God's particular call in our lives.
- To live by call means keeping our spirits open to God's spirit, being both committed to what we feel called to do and open to how the spirit leads us to express our call and gifts, always in love, freedom, and respect for others and their lives and callings and gifts
- Living by call means taking ultimate responsibility for our own life and what we feel God calls us to be and to do. This does not mean doing without others' support or help in discerning our call. It does mean not expecting others to agree, go along, or take responsibility for what we have committed to as

our call. We need to remember that everyone is not called to the same thing, that God works through diversity, not uniformity, and that we need to cultivate in ourselves a capacity to see and rejoice in the lives of others and what they are seeking to be and to do out of their relationship with God in Christ

- Call means remaining open to that “change in the wind,” when we may be no longer called to that particular thing or may be challenged or led to live out our call in a different way, based upon new understandings or changes in circumstances and needs
- Finally, though this is not all that can be said about it, living by call means not taking ourselves too seriously! If we are not experiencing joy or gratitude or freedom as we live out what we believe we are called to be and do, then we need to look at that. We are not called to change the world in one fell swoop all by ourselves! We remember that the One who calls us is the One whose wisdom and care and power are far beyond our perceiving or understanding.

One last word on behalf of Nicodemus. Jesus is kind of abrupt with him: How can it be that you are one of Israel’s teachers and you don’t get what I’m talking about? I am sympathetic toward Nicodemus. I think he is just where most of us are, still becoming fully aware of this other way to live our lives. We have been so conditioned since childhood to live out of all sorts of other things—peoples’ expectations, institutional structures, society’s demands, values based on competition with others and measuring ourselves against others. Being born anew or from above has little to do with a one-time, powerful spiritual experience. It has to do with letting our minds and hearts be re-shaped by Jesus’ life and teachings, and by God’s spirit rekindling our relationship with God. It has to do with waking up to life in its fullness, life of body and spirit, of water and spirit. In my experience, at least, I have found this to be a life-long process. It is an ongoing inward journey of our own re-birth, even as we are on the outward journey of what God calls us to do.