

**Sermon preached by the Reverend Cameron J. Soulis, Associate Rector  
at Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, PA  
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B  
January 21, 2024**

*Appointed Readings: Jonah 3:1-5,10; Ps. 62:6-14; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20*

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Why are you here?

Seriously. Why did you come to Calvary this morning? It's cold and snowy. There are lots of other things going on on Sunday morning, and many people in this city are taking advantage of them. So, why did you come?

What first brought you through these doors?

Why do you return?

I'll give you a little time to think.

Remember your answer. I'll return to this in a minute or so.

As you were listening to the readings this morning, you probably noticed that "call" is a predominant theme in them. In the first reading, we heard God calling Jonah to proclaim God's message to the people of Nineveh. In the Gospel, we heard the story of Jesus calling his first four disciples: Andrew, Simon, James, and John. Even the collect, that prayer we pray at the beginning of the service, asked God to give us grace "to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ."

And, you may have noticed that this is, in fact, the second Sunday in a row when call has been a theme. Last week, we had the story of God calling the boy Samuel in the Temple from the Hebrew Scriptures and John's account of Jesus calling his first disciples, in that case, his calling of Philip and Nathanael.

So, it seems to me, with all these readings, the Lectionary has given us an opportunity to think about call and to consider our own calls from God. So that brings me back to my original question. What brought you to Calvary? What keeps you coming to Calvary?

I expect that if everyone here were to share their answers to this question, we'd find plenty of commonalities. There would certainly be individual details that differed. But we'd find similarities: our music, the worship, our beautiful building, our children's formation classes, the programs that are offered. There would be some who came in a time of personal sorrow and were looking for solace. We'd learn about families who have worshiped at Calvary for generations. Some would tell us that they are here because a friend invited them to come for the first time.

Yet, underlying each one of our stories is that God moved in us. God called to us. Even if it were through another person, God called us here.

We responded. We are here.

Now, some of you may be wondering how I can say that your decision to come to church is a response to God's call to you. For, in hearing Bible stories like these - stories of prophets like Jonah and Samuel; stories of Jesus' first disciples - it can be really easy to think that to be called by God, you need to be someone who is set apart. Or you need to be ready to do some really big task. Because that certainly seemed to be the case for Jonah, for Samuel, and for the disciples, didn't it?

Jonah was sent to perform a big task - proclaiming to the inhabitants of Nineveh that God would destroy them unless they turned from their evil ways. Samuel was one who was set apart. He was the only prophet in a time when the Word of God was rare. The disciples Jesus called founded the Church (no small thing there). So, in comparison to these, the decision to attend Calvary seems trivial.

But, as Christians, we believe that God does choose and call each one of us individually. We believe that God calls us *not only* to follow Jesus, *but also* into the work and occupations of our lives.

Call is sometimes defined too narrowly in the Church. It is often thought that only the ordained clergy receive calls. Now, while we clergy certainly do receive a call from God for what we do, so does everyone else. People like middle school teachers, parents of young children, health care workers, finance professionals, lawyers, people who volunteer at non-profit organizations – they are all called by God and answered a call from God. And they are ordinary people, just like each one of us. Just like the four disciples in today’s Gospel were ordinary hard-working fishermen.

For, although Mark does not give us many details about them in his story, he certainly tells us enough to know they were really fishermen. He talks about Simon and Andrew were casting a net into the sea. He tells us James and John were mending nets. He tells us they left the boat. There was really nothing out of the ordinary about who they were or what they were doing. Yet, Jesus called them.

He didn’t require any special information or knowledge from them either. He didn’t ask for a resume and cover letter. He didn’t make them take a test or undergo a background check. He called them as they were. Far from perfect.

It’s true that they responded well when Jesus called them. They immediately got up and followed Jesus. But later, after that initial yes... well, there were plenty of mistakes! They each had times of not understanding what Jesus was teaching them. Of striving for power and prestige in a worldly way. Of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. Of abandoning Jesus in his time of greatest need. Nonetheless, Jesus chose them, called them, loved them, in spite of their imperfections and ordinariness. Just as he does with us.

The lessons also remind us of how God’s call is made known within community. The story of Samuel’s call, which we heard last week, illustrates this point especially. You might remember from that story that Samuel was lying down in the Temple. It was night and he heard his name being called out. So, he got up and ran to Eli, the priest under whom he was ministering. Eli said, “No, no, I didn’t call you. Go back to bed.” So, Samuel did. This happened again and again. It was when Samuel ran to him the third time, that Eli realized that it was God who was calling Samuel and told him how to answer the next time. Samuel needed Eli to recognize his call from God.

Like Samuel, we too have times we need help recognizing and understanding our own calls from God. That help could come through your own initiative by going to talk to a trusted friend or family member. That person can serve in a role like Eli’s and be able to help us recognize God’s voice when we cannot. Or that help might come seemingly out of the blue when a friend or acquaintance says something that ends up pointing you in a different direction or makes you think about something in a new way. Those of you who are at Calvary because you received an invitation to come here are an example of this kind of hearing God’s call in community. As are those of us who ended up making a particular choice in our lives after another person told us something we hadn’t considered before.

So, I ask you, to what is God calling you now?

Of course, our call to follow Jesus remains constant. And it’s evident that we’ve each responded to that call by our presence here. But the circumstances around our call from God, the ways in which Jesus calls us to follow and deepen our relationship with him, those change over the course of our lives. Thus, part of the work of the Christian life is to listen for God’s voice as we go through our lives and consider what God might be asking of us in each phase. For God’s call is always into an uncertain future. When we accept God’s invitation, we cannot know where it will eventually lead. As we go along, we need to listen for God’s voice pointing us into the right direction.

Consider the disciples again. When Jesus called Andrew, Simon, James, and John, he didn’t give them any additional instructions. He said only, “Follow me.” Had the disciples known

what they were really getting themselves into, they probably would have been scared out of their minds! Yet, by walking alongside Jesus and listening to his teaching while he was alive, and then after the resurrection, through prayer and discussions in community, they learned where God was calling them to go and were prepared at the right times to face the difficulties into which their call led them.

So again, I ask you, to what is God calling you now?

What will you do to listen for that call?

May God give us the grace to answer readily our call. Amen.