

The Call

For all who love God and seek to follow in the footsteps of Jesus the Messiah, there is a Call...a summons...an invitation to a life burdened with glorious purpose. Sometimes the Call comes as a quiet whisper, a barely detectable echo rattling around in your head that you just can't shake. Sometimes it comes through the voice of a friend, an affirmation of something they see in you that perhaps you don't see in yourself. Sometimes it comes as a feeling deep down in the pit of your stomach, a truly gut-wrenching feeling that God is asking something of you, and the only right answer is "Yes." And sometimes the Call comes as clearly and unmistakably as a voice from a loudspeaker: "Hey you...yes, you! Are you ready for an adventure?" However the Call comes to you, make no mistake about it, you can't escape it. It's there, and one way or another, whether you are running from it or running towards it...your life will be lived in response to it.

I can't forget when I heard the Call. It was August 22, 1999. I was a 14 year old boy wrestling with all the awkwardness that comes with puberty and freshman year. My Youth Group was having a Back to School Bash full of pizza, ping pong, and Dr. Pepper. But somewhere in the middle of all that, Joe Tanner, my Youth Pastor, preached what I can only assume was a message about totally surrendering your life to Jesus Christ. And though my mind was always half-fixed on lightsabers and comic books, something of his sermon must have wriggled its way into my ear, because when he told us all to bow our heads, close our eyes, and raise our hands if we felt called to a life of full-time ministry...well, my hand shot up before I could even understand what was happening and sheepishly lower it back down. I had one of those gut-wrenching feelings in the pit of my stomach, and I knew that if I didn't raise my hand and talk to him about this feeling, I was going to implode. And here I am, almost 20 years later,

having professionally served 4 churches in 2 different denominations, in states nearly 2,000 miles apart.

Like the fishermen mentioned this morning, when I heard the voice of Jesus say, “*Follow me and I will make you fish for people,*” I did just that. I followed him. I preached my first sermon a few months after that fateful pizza party and I haven’t deviated from my path since. I love this work. I truly do. To have seen that Call come to fruition, to be a pastor, is a dream come true. I have the privilege of being invited into your lives to share in both the joys and the struggles. I have been authorized to preside at celebrations of the Holy Eucharist. It’s unbelievably beautiful to hold wriggling babies in my arms and cover their heads with water, being the hands of Jesus as he welcomes them into his Church. I mean, what more could I ask for. But, as with most things, there’s a flip side to this life.

Sometimes, all I want to do is run from the Call. There are moments when I absolutely do not want to be a parish priest...when the demands of this work seem to eclipse the joy. There are even moments when I wish I wasn’t a Christian, following, however falteringly, in the footsteps of Jesus. Though I’ve been ordained a priest in the Church, that doesn’t make me any less human and sinful than any other baptized Christian. Every now and again, I catch myself wanting nothing more than to live life my way...to be free to indulge all of my unhealthy appetites and impulses...to live a life accountable to nobody. I may have answered the Call to kingdom-work like those four fishermen did, but I have a bit of Jonah in me too. Before Jonah finally answered the Call to preach to the people of Nineveh, he tried to get as far away from that city as he could. He wanted nothing to do with the Call, nor with the God from whom the Call came. Come to think of it, even Peter, one of those first called by Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, didn’t always live up to the demands of the Call. When confronted with the possibly

painful consequences of the Call during the trial and execution of Jesus, he cursed the very man in whom he had found salvation. Though I've never found myself cursing God to escape a painful death, I have found myself at times wanting nothing to do with the cost and demands of discipleship.

But, in perhaps a paradoxical and unexpected way, I take great delight in the lives of both Jonah and Peter, because it gives me hope for my own life. If God could use a fleeing, unfaithful man such as Jonah to bring salvation to an entire city, then perhaps God can indeed use me. If Jesus was willing to forgive Peter his curses and denials, and thus use him as a hope-filled, life-giving mouthpiece on the day of Pentecost, then perhaps God can indeed use me. To borrow and adapt a few lyrics from the greatest band of all time, Metallica, "All sinners have a future, and all saints have a past." You see, God is not blind to our imperfections, nor to the ways in which we are often prone to wander and leave the very God we love. But God calls us into this wondrous life of service and kingdom-building anyhow.

There's a small detail in our Gospel passage this morning that I have come to cherish. *"Jesus saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea...and Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people....as he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them."* There's a beauty in this parallelism that gets right to the point of what I'm talking about. Simon and Andrew's nets were whole, were usable, were ready for service. Yet James and John...their nets were broken, in need of mending. Jesus didn't discriminate one way or another. Whole nets, broken nets...whole souls, broken souls...Jesus calls us and equips us for the task, even if we don't believe we are fit or ready to be called. At the end of the day, it's not our

righteousness or holiness that truly matters. It's the holiness of Jesus Christ which equips us for a life of service, a life of answering the Call, even if we stumble and fall along the way.

However perfect or imperfect you may be, there isn't much you can do that God can't undo through the power of forgiveness and redemption. You can run, you can hide, you can curse, you can deny, you can do everything in your power to forsake the Call God has for you, but God will always be waiting with arms open wide to welcome you back into the fold... to welcome you back to your place in the vineyard...to welcome you back, to remind you of who you truly are in God's eyes, and to restore and refresh you for the kingdom work with which you have been entrusted.