

## “The Call” by Bruce Lauterwasser on 8/30/20

Hello First Congregational Church in Winchester, members, friends, guests, and visitors alike, it is a joy to have you all worshipping today.

My pulpit this morning is a lovely private room at Massachusetts General Hospital. Let's just pray that I can stay upright for the next 10 minutes, perhaps in more ways than one.

There is a long tradition in the Hebrew bible of prophets, those emissaries of God sent to call God's people back to their promised piety and devotion, being drawn to their vocation by a call from God. The call can come in one of many forms and at any point in the prophet's life. Jeremiah, for example, speaks of being called while in his mother's womb. Samuel, while perhaps not technically a prophet, is called as a young boy while serving in the temple under the priest Eli.

A call from God is much like an invitation, an invitation to participate in God's plan for one's life and for the world. There is a crucial difference however. An invitation comes with an implicit, sometimes explicit, expectation of a reply, an RSVP. Yes, I'll come. No, I can't make it. Or let me get back to you on that. A call from God, on the other hand, does not come with an RSVP. God is not interested in hearing, "Let me get back to you on that." And the Bible is full of stories that illustrate the range of reactions to God's call. We tend to think of our Bible heroes stepping up with courage and sometimes even zeal. Mary, despite likely being only a young teenager, accepts the words of the angel with grace and strength. On the other hand, a certain degree of reluctance was not an unheard of reaction to God's call in biblical times. One need only think of Jonah catching the first ship out of port when God comes calling.

Today's scripture readings relate to the calls of two of the most famous figures in the entire Bible, Moses and Jesus, and they show how difficult it can be to answer God's call, and, at least in Moses' case, how persistent God can be in following up on the call. Moses is all set to check the RSVP with "Sorry, I can't make it." But that's not happening. More about that later. Right now, I want to explore the nature of a call from God. And the reason that I want to pursue this subject is because I am convinced that a call from God is not limited to prophets and religious leaders. I believe that God calls each of us at some point in our lives. So what does that call look like?

It seems to me that there are at least two facets to a call, recognition and response. When we think about a call from God we tend to think of the classic mountain top experience, a revelation or epiphany, something so obvious that there is no way it could go unrecognized. And, of course, this type of experience does occur. I was taken to task many years ago by a former pastor at this church when I suggested in a Confirmation Sunday sermon that such a call could be a fleeting experience, particularly among the impressionable young. He assured me that his own youthful hill top experience had been the real thing. But I do believe that a far more common experience is unrecognized, or perhaps more accurately, uncertainty. I was taken by Sarah Gallop's statement in her sermon earlier this summer, "Lately, I've been trying

to decide what I am". I interpreted that statement to mean that Sarah was sensing that perhaps God was calling, and she was doing everything she could to discern the nature of that call. In my own life I have never felt a sense of calling from God. And yet I can very clearly discern an evolution over the past 20 years or so from a very intellectually oriented faith to a faith firmly grounded on a growing relationship with God. Has God been calling me into that closer relationship? Is this God's call on my life? I'm not so sure, because while my renewed faith has been a source of great comfort to me during trying times, I'm not sure that it has done anything to advance God's plan for our world, which I believe is an essential element of a true call from God. So perhaps there is yet more to come for me.

If we are able to recognize God's call, then what? How do we respond? I suggest that there are at least two aspects to one's response to God's call: it will be difficult, and it will be transformational. Both scripture readings today emphasize the difficulty inherent in responding to God's call. Both show the need for courage, in Moses' case the courage to face the terrible power of pharaoh and speak boldly when he knows that he is not typically able to do that. If you read on in Exodus beyond today's passage, you will find that Moses has a rather protracted discussion with God about just exactly how he is going to accomplish the task of changing pharaoh's mind. In Exodus 4, verse 10 Moses says "Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue". God assures Moses that he will not be alone, and even offers very specific assistance with the speaking part by sending Moses' brother Aaron along as the speaker.

In Jesus' case, the difficulty is much greater, that is, the understanding that God's call on his life requires the ultimate sacrifice, a slow and painful death without any assurance that his life's work will have borne fruit. He has doubts about his ability to carry out the task that God has assigned, as we hear reflected in his prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane. In today's passage, Peter voices those doubts but Jesus recognizes immediately that such doubts are a stumbling block and must be put aside. Jesus also tells his followers that in answering their own calls, they will be required to take up their cross and follow him.

When Lisa Loughlin preached earlier this summer, she did not explicitly talk about a call from God, but what I heard her saying is that she feels called as one of God's children, and particularly as a white person to listen to, understand, and act to respond to the voices of our Black brothers and sisters when they share their experiences and concerns. Lisa suggested that responding to this call will be hard work for her, and I think that can generally be said about most of God's calls to God's people. If it were easy, then we would have listened more closely, more readily, and much sooner to hear our individual call. Rob Skinner, in his sermon two weeks ago, spoke of how difficult it will be for him to create the kind of professional workplace that he is coming to understand is needed by his black and brown colleagues.

The second point I want to consider in connection with how one responds to a call from God, a point which is perhaps evident in the discussion so far, is that a call from God is almost always associated with a need for change in the individual being called. In fact, I don't believe that we

can respond to God's call without being changed in some fundamental way, and without such change we will not be effective in whatever task God calls us to perform. The prophet, perhaps naturally shy and retiring, or like Moses not gifted with a silver tongue, must become bold and articulate. Laurie Roby, in reflecting on the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel pointed out that the result of that wrestling, the result of responding to God's call, is that, to quote Laurie "we have received a new name". We are of necessity changed by responding to God's call. That understanding of a need for change leads me to my final point.

I have always believed that God's call to each one of us is unique. My call is not the same as your call. God searches us and knows us and draws upon our strengths (known or unknown to ourselves) to fashion a call that will be most effective in building the kingdom. But over the past several weeks and months, as I have listened to the thoughts and words of Lisa, and Sarah, of Taylor, Julianne and others, I have begun to feel as though God is working in a slightly different way, fashioning a collective call to all of God's creation to undertake a journey of transformation. I believe that God is calling us all to a time of reflection, of conversation, of learning so that we might understand, and then act upon the understanding, that our collective history has resulted in a society today in which some of God's children are privileged over others, a society which does not offer equal opportunity to all, and a society which does not do nearly enough to fulfill Jesus' call to tend to the least of those among us.

Do you hear that call? Do we as a people of God, a particular faith community in Winchester Massachusetts, hear that call? If we do, then how do we answer that call? If our biblical foundation is any guide, then God has already given us the tools and the capability to respond to that call. It will require change, change in virtually every one of us, and perhaps painful change. But we are not on our own in trying to figure this out. God will guide us. I know that it seems like a task too large, an ask too great, that we should achieve a just and equitable society. But all things are possible with God. Both Julianne and Trent, in their summer sermons, suggest that our view of God is far too limited. Open the aperture of your heart. Have faith. No task is too large with God's help. So let us hear God's call, and let us collectively say, "Here am I Lord".

Amen