

When God Calls

Luke 1:5-22

INTRODUCTION

The main character in this part of the Christmas story, Zechariah, was a priest. That means he was a direct descendant of Aaron (the brother of Moses). Because of the number of years that had passed and all the generations of people that had been born in that span of time, the reality was that there were too many priests. By one estimate there were more than 20,000 priests.

- Only at Passover, Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles did all of the priests serve, and then only because of the large number of sacrifices that were offered on those occasions.
- For the rest of the year, each priest would serve two different periods of one week each.
- For priests who loved their work, they looked forward to that week. It was the highlight of their lives, even if the job they were assigned was not very glamorous.
- Their specific assignments were determined by the drawing of lots.
- Serving in the Holy of Holies, as Zechariah was doing in our text, was an honor only a few priests would ever experience.

Priests were expected to only marry a woman whose Jewish lineage was pure – so that their male children would be qualified to be priests too. Zechariah did. He married Elizabeth, the daughter of a priest. Sort of a preacher's kid marrying a preacher's kid. We will talk more about Elizabeth next week.

Both Zechariah and Elizabeth were people of great faith. Our text calls them:

... righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. (Luke 1:6).

They had one major flaw though:

But they were childless, because Elizabeth was not able to conceive and they were both very old. (Luke 1:7)

And that was a major problem. You see Jewish Rabbis had a list of seven people who were excommunicated from God. Their list began:

A Jew who has no wife, or a Jew who has a wife and who has no child.

So you can imagine the combination of joy and sadness running through Zechariah's mind as he performed his priestly duties there in that holy place: A righteous man, serving in the highest place of honor, and yet a man who likely believed he had been excommunicated from God.

But it was there ... in that moment that Zechariah heard the call of God.

During this Advent season I am inviting you to come with me on a journey into the Scriptures so that together we might ...

Experience the wonder!

... of the Christmas story.

All throughout this well-known story there are those "wow" moments, but because we know the story of Christmas so well we often miss the "wow" impact of those moments. While the world around us is speeding up and rushing through these days, as the people of God let us slow down just enough to experience once again the wonder.

Today we focus on the wonder of God's call in our lives. I make two observations:

#1: GOD'S CALL COMES AT UNEXPECTED TIMES

All throughout the pages of Scripture we find men and women of great faith who heard the call of God when they did not expect to hear it:

- Moses was tending sheep on the dark side of a mountain when he saw a burning bush. In that "God-forsaken" place, he heard God's call.
- Gideon was hiding from the Midianites, threshing his wheat crop in a wine press. There in the seclusion God found him, and called him.
- Matthew was collecting taxes.
- Peter, Andrew, James and John were fishing.
- And Zechariah was busy doing the rituals assigned to him as the priest on duty that day.

For most of us, the Call of God is associated with ministers and missionaries. We often hear it expressed in phrases like:

- He received the call to the ministry at age 16.
- She was called to work with disabled children in Africa.

Not the sort of thing that touches the life of the "ordinary" Christian. But that is not a correct understanding.

Every one of us must hear and will hear the call of God.

The Apostle Paul wrote in the New Testament book of Thessalonians,

He called you to salvation when we told you the Good News; now you can share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thessalonians 2:14)

And, in Romans we read:

For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." (Romans 11 :29).

John said:

“He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.” (John 10:3)

And when God's call comes, it isn't something that you are likely to miss or overlook. It will cause you to say “wow.”

#2: GOD'S CALL COMES EVEN IF WE THINK WE ARE NOT WORTHY

Part of the reason the call may be unexpected is that we often don't think of ourselves as worthy.

- Moses was tending sheep because he was on the Most Wanted list by the Egyptian forces for murder. God certainly couldn't use him, right? But God called him to lead the people of Israel out of captivity in Egypt.
- Gideon was an obscure man from a small tribe. It was hard to believe God even knew who he was. But God chose him to lead the armies of Israel to defeat the mighty Midianites..
- Matthew was collecting taxes. Not the most honorable profession. Peter, Andrew, James and John were fishing. They weren't properly educated. But these five men became the core of the band of disciples that ministered with Jesus for three years and then led the newly formed church for the decades immediately following the crucifixion.
- And Zechariah ... well he was excommunicated, remember? But this excommunicated man was called by God to become the father of John the Baptist.

Ordinary people called by God ... and used by God for His glory! Wow.

APPLICATION

I wish I would have been working on this sermon a year ago, because in the process of writing it I realized I do not know the story behind my Dad's call to the ministry. I know that he tried to bargain his way out of it. I know that it happened with he was in his early 30s.

For me, the call of God into the ministry came at church camp on June 30, 1972. Fifty years ago. It was during a lakeside communion service on the final night.

But the point of this sermon isn't that God calls people into the ministry. No, it is that part of the wonder of the story is that God calls every person into His service.

When the Apostle Paul tried to explain this to the Christians in Corinth, he used the image of a human body – and compared it to the Body of Christ. He taught them that every Christian is called by God and given gifts and talents to make that Body of Christ complete.

God's various gifts are handed out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various ministries are carried out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various expressions of power are in action everywhere; but God himself is behind it all. Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people! The variety is wonderful:

All these gifts have a common origin but are handed out one by one by the one Spirit of God. He decides who gets what, and when.

God has carefully placed each part of the body right where he wanted it. (1 Corinthians 12, The Message)

The greatest wonder is not that God called Moses or Gideon or even Zechariah. It is that God calls you and me. Jesus came to offer salvation to all. But you and I get to be the vessels through which that offer is conveyed.

How wonderful is that?

Amen.