

THE SHEEPFOLD

For as long as I can remember, I have been perplexed by this notion of a “call”. If I ever heard the word in the churches of my youth it has been long forgotten, and it was not until I entered seminary that the image and the idea of a “call” became the norm, bandied about, used by everyone, in every circumstance, and to justify just about any outlook, view, behavior or proposition. When today’s Collect tells us: *“Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads”*, I still feel both thrilled and yet equally mystified. Here, I think, as I wrestle with today’s readings and with life in general, is where and why the matter remains so unresolved. And here, in the midst of a time to reflect back and dream ahead, in a period of transition and uncertainty and opportunity for all of us, does this whole question of a “call” loom large, and foreboding, and portentous, yet also hopeful and fruitful and full of grace.

“Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” [John 1:29] writes the author of John in an earlier and well-known verse. In other Gospel cycles we hear: *“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near.”* Or, from this morning, seemingly so clearly, *“Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.”* [John 10:9] In other words, ‘come on in’, ‘I’ve got you covered’, ‘I’m calling you.’ But how many times have I heard or read or seen that proclaimed, just in my lifetime alone? For nearly 2000 years someone, somewhere, has been making such a claim. Perhaps it is true, perhaps the Second Coming, the True Shepherd, has arrived or is now taking place in our midst. But I certainly can’t prove it, and I’m ultimately not sure, and neither are most people. It’s a rather difficult claim to defend in a world such as ours, is it not?

“I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short ...” [1 Cor. 7:29] writes Paul to his beloved but troubled church in Corinth, *“...strive for the greater gifts”*. But what does that mean? Paul goes on to cite examples of Law versus the Spirit, literal slavery and Christian freedom, the variety of gifts and the appointment of roles, radical change and the giving up of everything, including family and relationships, but that still does not answer for me the central question of a

“call” or assignment or what is really happening. How do we figure out who we are or who we are not? What do we hear or see, not just in ourselves but in others? What does this all mean? How do we actually respond, why do we even answer? Or, as in almost every single case you can find in scripture, why do we usually flee, resist, run away, and hide?

Maybe the central question regarding being “called” is this -- How do we know, now or ever, if that still small voice which we hear (or think we hear) is really God or merely our own self-interest? How do we know, **as a community**, if our sense of a “return” or direction or purpose is right or providential; does it benefit only us or are we onto something significantly bigger? How do we know, if we abide even vaguely by Paul’s writings in scripture, that the choices we make and the decisions we suffer, the roads not taken or sometimes stumbled upon, the risks avoided or the dangers endured, the friendships ended and the worldly pursuits abandoned are really, authentically, truly some kind of “call”? If indeed, as Paul writes, *“the present form of the world is passing away”* the big question therefore remains: What is taking its place? What are we supposed to be doing?

All our lessons during this Easter Season (and perhaps even more mystically, all our scripture during this time of pandemic and of transition) -- all our worship and meetings and reflections and outreach and inreach and future, all are focused on this fundamental matter. Scripture is directing us as a community to consider the question of significant transformation and deep change, costly amendment and considerable risk. What I also suspect is that for most of us in this sacred time, such a question is never all that far from our own personal and daily lives, wherever it is that we now find ourselves upon life’s journey.

The standard theological dictionaries define a “call” or “calling” in this way: *“calling -- the divine summons to an individual or [a] group to enter into a meaningful fellowship with God and [to]*

participate in the divine plan for human salvation."¹ For me the second part is clear - that of engaging in a relationship with God for the betterment of the world; after all, who would not strive for such charity and kindness and goodness? But the first part, the persuasion of some "divine summons", is scary, at least to me, and such a claim is often fraught with danger and even manipulation. And yet on the other hand there is a far greater peril, and that peril is **not** to wrestle with or to seek or to struggle or to understand a call at all. The very gravest hazard to me, is any kind of giving up or resignation or sense of defeat. The very gravest hazard is to be alone, bereft, disinterested, and devoid of any regard for what God might be doing in our lives and in our world. But once we are past that point of boredom, anger, rejection, grief or paralysis, then our challenge becomes how do we find God, how do we invite God to find us, how do we hear God, and how do we know, in fact, that this *IS* God who is calling?

I am afraid that I can offer no definitive or foolproof response. But scripture and history and your life and my life reveal that the very searching, the very hopefulness, the very belief (however fragile that belief may be) that God has some desire and care and intention for us is in itself a great gift. That is longing and faith and conviction and the great promise, as scripture reminds, of things unseen and yet still hoped for. The necessary doubt, as I spoke of these last few weeks, which so often accompanies our spiritual journey, is also, in its own lovely way, a great reward. As you heard me say, doubt keeps us curious and honest and never fully satisfied and joyfully searching. Doubt makes us want to know more and hear other stories and consider other ways and imagine yet newer and different tomorrows. Yes, endless doubt can also get exhausting. That is why we need rest and renewal, time away and time alone. That is why we are involved in communities, not just in Southwick but in so many other ways, one of one kind and one of another. But then we move on, always forward, never backward.

¹The Dictionary of Bible and Religion, p173. c1986. Abingdon. W.H. Gentz, ed.

Personally I view the whole, great scope of Biblical history as a living, breathing dynamic of doubt and hope and passage, leading to more doubt and more hope and still more movement. From Moses to Jonah to Amos to Thomas to me and to us, characters of faithful uncertainty appear across the millennia, and they remind us that even if we think we have the one, final, ultimate, clear and irrevocable answer, then we probably do not. That even if we presume our work to be done, it probably is not. We believe in God, the Spirit, the Divine, and that is real. And this Holiness and this Godliness invites us to be part of something big, really big, bigger than words and descriptions, and that too is real. And that same Spirit says that you and I as individuals, and we as communities like Southwick Community Episcopal Church, and layer upon layer of the gathered and searching faithful are all part of this epic sweep from fallenness into redemption, from imperfection to perfection, from death into life. But along the way, in the day-to-day, in the in-between, life is never so certain nor so clear. Such irresolution and longing is often hard but I would also argue that it is also joyful and filled with wonder, and that is really the reason for our being at all.

Today especially, in the context of this important and essential time for Southwick Community Church, ask yourselves these tough but elemental questions about being “called”, about God’s “call”, and about our collective and communal “call”. Ask yourselves **how** we know and **what** we know, **where** we are going and **why**? Ask yourselves, “*what is our purpose; why are we here?*” And ask yourselves one of the hardest yet most spiritually essential questions of all, a question you have heard me lovingly pose before: “*What would the world outside these walls miss the most if our doors were closed forever?*” But then, I would urge, don’t try to push or force or script or schedule an answer too hastily. Don’t feel compelled to reach a rock hard conclusion in some specific measure of time. The Holy Spirit does not work that way, and neither should we.

Rather, keep on moving and stick with the journey. Keep working and walking, but also keep sitting and meditating and praying. Follow your heart. Find stillness. Embrace that which is truly precious and let the rest be cast aside. Stay patient and courageous.

Rejoice in the small and luminous epiphanies that enter all of our lives. Love one another, in the truest and most authentic sense of that Christian sentiment. Try to find a way to do the necessary and sometimes thankless work of the Kingdom even as the Kingdom itself is still taking shape. Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly, as the Prophet Micah implores. **[Micha 6:8]** And know that this “*divine summons*”, this divine calling, while surely out there somewhere, will become ever more clear in time, in ways which we do not yet know, and in ways which we cannot yet even imagine.

~ ***Amen.***