

**“Elements of Genuine Calling”**  
**Isaiah 6:1–8; 1 Corinthians 15:1–11; Luke 5:1–11**  
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A predecessor of mine in another setting took great offense at the dramatic nature of stories of calling some preachers tell, so much so that he invented a personal story to illustrate the outlandish and self-serving nature of these tales.

“Let me tell you my story of calling,” John would say, “I was raised on a farm in Catawba County, and it was hard work throughout the year. One hot day in the middle of summer, I was sweating away in a corn field with my father when the preacher stopped by for a visit. While I kept working, Daddy went into the house. Momma made some lemonade. And Daddy and that preacher sat for quite a while in the cool shade on the porch, just talking and sipping lemonade. That’s when I decided that was what I wanted to do, what God was calling me to do.”

John’s way of expressing his opinion was probably offensive to some, but his point was well-taken. Many stories of calling are not just overly dramatic but also self-serving in that they make it appear like the persons telling them are the most special people in the world and thus, no matter how hard they tried to resist, God just had to have them, couldn’t manage without them. So, they fought, and they fought, but God wouldn’t quit trying. So, they finally gave in and said, “Yes.” But maybe they just wanted to sip lemonade rather than pick corn.

Who knows? We are called in different ways, and no one is worthy to judge another person’s experience, but in the stories of calling we find in scripture, including those in our texts today, there is no place for arrogance or self-promotion. Some stories are quite dramatic while others are not, but there are certain elements of any genuine calling we might look for as we consider our experience and anyone else’s.

One thing we find in biblical stories of calling is that they begin with the majesty and holiness, the mystery and wonder of God. God is primary actor. Without God, there is no calling in the sacred sense.

In our reading from Isaiah, the prophet encounters a Holy God. It is the year King Uziah died, 742 BCE, and Isaiah walks into the temple in Jerusalem, as he no doubt has many times before, but this time the Holy One appears in a dramatic way, sitting on a throne, high and lofty, with robe hem filling the temple. Angelic figures with six wings called seraphs are there, calling out, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of God’s glory.” The pivots on the thresholds shake, and smoke fills the room.

It’s a bit more than sipping lemonade on the porch. It’s beyond anything Isaiah has experienced before. God shows up in a dramatic way, at God’s own initiative. There is no indication that Isaiah has asked for this meeting. On the contrary, he is terrified by it. So, it violates my predecessor’s “no drama” rule, but it is not self-serving. This is all about God, the Holy One, the Lord of hosts.

We don’t read about Paul’s calling in the verses from 1 Corinthians 15, but Paul is living out this calling, telling others about Jesus, and he is doing so partly because of that dramatic experience on the Damascus Road where God shows up and calls Paul to a radical change in direction from persecutor of Christians to lead missionary of the faith. But Paul also follows this path because of the dramatic work God has done in Christ — taking on human flesh, teaching and healing, dying and rising to new life. Paul follows this new path because of what God has done.

These stories of calling begin with majestic acts by a Holy God, as does the story of calling we read about in Luke 5. Here Peter is being called to follow Jesus and given a focus for this calling. Where does the experience begin? With something Jesus makes possible, a miraculous catch of fish. We’ll get to Peter’s response, but the experience begins with something extraordinary God-in-Christ does. So it goes with any genuine experience of calling; it begins with God.

I have shared with some of you an experience I had in adolescence. I started attending church for the first time at age fifteen. There were numerous motivations for my involvement but chief among them was a genuine interest in spiritual questions, and the musical “Jesus Christ Superstar” had sparked my interest in the Jesus story. One evening, in a prayer time, I asked whatever form of deity who might be out there for

some tangible sign of Divine existence. I didn't know who or what I was praying to, only that I sought a basis for moving forward in faith.

But immediately after I uttered these words, I wondered what I would do if such a deity were to show up. Could I handle that? And as I was wondering, almost taking back my request, I had an overwhelming sense that I was not alone. There were no six-winged seraphs, there was no smoke in the room, but I was not alone. The Holy and Mysterious One was with me, and I have never again doubted the existence of God. There were other stages in my calling to ministry, but it all began with this mystical experience of the Holy.

Biblical stories of calling begin with the majestic acts of a Holy God. What happens next is that persons being called inevitably feel unworthy to be in God's presence, much less serve in any special role. They created sense their creatureliness in a profound way in the presence of the Creator. Humility is the only possible response to being called.

When Isaiah realizes he is in the presence of a Holy God, he says, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" Paul says he is the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because he persecuted the church of God. When all the fish are hauled in, Peter falls down at the knees of Jesus, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." All who realize they are in the presence of God are overcome with a profound sense of inadequacy. Humility characterizes their response.

I have often had people express this kind of response to being asked to serve in certain roles of leadership in the church, like deacon, but while I have listened to their concerns, I have almost always assured them that anyone who feels inadequate is probably well-suited to the calling. It's the person who is highly confident of their worthiness, champing at the bit to be in leadership, who makes me nervous! They may or may not have an agenda, but they do express a kind of arrogance that has no place in Christian service.

Even in roles of public leadership not associated with the church, a complete lack of humility is problematic. We want leaders who are

qualified and thus have a level of confidence in what they are doing, but if they don't seem to have any grasp of the weight of decision making, the consequences of their decisions, it's probably because they don't have any grasp. Outside a sacred context, sacred principles do not necessarily apply, but if faith leaders use God language to affirm public leaders, they do. Anyone who claims God's blessing on a leader who is completely lacking in humility and self-awareness is on shaky ground. Those who are called by God are confronted by the majesty of God, and when they are, they fall on their knees in recognition of their frailty.

But in the biblical stories of calling, something always seems to happen when people acknowledge their frailty — God extends grace. One of the seraphs in the temple brings a live coal to Isaiah and says his guilt has departed and his sin is blotted out. Paul says that even though he persecuted the church, by the grace of God he is what he is. When Peter recognizes his frailty and sin, Jesus says, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” Grace here means forgiveness and acceptance, but it also means God is willing to use him. This latter embodiment of grace is found in all three stories of calling. That God calls Isaiah, Paul, and Peter to service is, in and of itself, an act of grace.

So is our calling, it is an act of grace, and our service may resemble that of these three ancient servants of God. Isaiah is called to the prophetic ministry of holding a nation accountable to Divine standards. Paul is called to tell the world, insiders and outsiders to Jewish tradition, who Jesus is. Peter is called to catch people, which sounds odd, but it means taking or saving them alive for God's realm. We're not talking about catching to consume, as we might fish. It's a catch-and-release program, with the human catch being released into better water, a more sacred existence, a place with and for God.

All these paths of service seem needful to this day. We need people who will hold our leaders accountable in this unimaginably chaotic time. We need people who will tell others who Jesus really is — the Christ of scripture who teaches and heals, welcomes the sinner and outcast, lives and dies and is raised for the broken. And we need people who will save the weak and wounded from the hostile and aggressive.

I read a fascinating article this week in an issue of *Baptist History and Heritage* entitled “All Barriers Are Broken Down” written by Lisa R. Lindell (Volume LVIII, Number 3, 2023, pp. 19-32). It tells the amazing story of Ida Sherman Womeldorf who had such a calling. She was skeptical in her views as a young adult but experienced a conversion and evangelistic calling while teaching in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Ida was consecrated to ministry in 1892 and became an evangelist and later pastor of the Baptist church in Deadwood, South Dakota. We may be surprised that a woman served in such roles then, but she did, and Ida made a difference in the communities where she served.

Deadwood was a mining town where Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane gained fame. The “badlands” in town had saloons, dance halls, brothels, and gambling establishments when Ida became pastor in 1895. One writer of the time said of Deadwood, “The descent is easy and there is not a rung missing in the ladder to perdition.”

Yet Ida was not discouraged. She held services for the miners, looked after abandoned children, and cared for sick employees of the entertainment venues. “How wide the gulf is,” she said, “between what Jesus taught and the practice of his professed followers! He gathered around him the poor, the outcasts, the despised wrecks of a brutal civilization like our own, and spoke words of comfort.”

At a funeral for a dance hall employee who died of an overdose, she referenced John 3:16, saying “For God so loved the world... Christ shed his blood to wash away all sin under whatever circumstances or conditions... we are all sinners... there are no distinctions... all barriers are broken down and all wounds healed by the Savior.” She preached that message of love and inclusion 1896 and lived it every day. No wonder she packed the house! Her calling was shaped by grace in every way, and like Peter, she was called to save the weak and wounded.

Many people claim to be called by God, but a genuine calling begins in an experience with the Holy, it evokes feelings of unworthiness, and it ends in grace, the kind that enables us to remain in God’s presence, the kind that empowers us for ministries of love and justice. We need more people to embrace this calling in our world today.