

Date: February 4, 2007

SUNDAY: Ordinary 5

SERMON: Vision and Vocation

Text(s): Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11

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Unless you're from somewhere very far away, like Massachusetts, I imagine that you've been following with both interest and sadness the story of Hanley Denning over the past couple weeks. She's the young woman from Yarmouth, and a graduate of Bowdoin, who was killed in the car accident in Guatemala where she was the founder and executive director of the program Safe Passage. What an inspiring story hers is! Following her Master's degree program, she went to Guatemala to improve her Spanish so she could communicate better with the children she was teaching in Massachusetts. While in Guatemala, at the invitation of a Catholic nun, she visited the huge garbage dump in the capital, where thousands of desperately poor people survive by scavenging the garbage dump. Seeing the children who were working the dump site instead of attending school, she found her calling, her vocation. And the rest is history. Today, the organization which she founded is having a remarkable impact on the lives of families and particularly on the lives of children who are receiving an education that will enable them to envision a different life than the one they and their parents before them knew—a life of struggle for survival scavenging in a garbage dump.

Her story and her strong sense of calling, were very much on my mind as I began re-reading the scripture texts for this week, both of which have to do with this business of being "called" to something. It also triggered some reflections about my own sense of calling, and some questions about what it means to say that we feel called to something or that we have a calling. I don't know what, if any, religious faith commitments Hanley Denning had; the stories I read didn't speak much about that. And I'm not suggesting that only Christians can have a sense

of calling. But it is true that speaking about feeling "called" is very common among people of faith, and among Christians, in particular. It's part of the vocabulary of our tradition, though I'm not always sure we really understand what we mean.

Perhaps we need to begin by trying to be clear about what we mean when we speak of a calling, so we're all on the same page, so to speak. When we talk about a calling, we're talking about something more than just the job we do to earn a living, aren't we? Our job *may* serve as the way we live out our sense of calling, but not necessarily. If our calling and our job are one and the same, then that's a happy convergence, but in some cases our jobs may simply be jobs that help pay the bills so that we can follow our real calling. Also, if job and calling were simply synonymous, then when we retire, any sense of calling would disappear as well. And we know that's not the case. When we say we feel called to something, we're usually talking about some inner sense of compulsion to follow a particular course in our lives, or undertake some particular work at a particular time or in a particular set of circumstances. It may be a call that lasts a lifetime or that has a shorter, more definite timespan to it. But common to any real sense of call is the feeling that it is something to which we respond rather than something we simply choose to do. Something beyond us beckons or draws us to whatever it is we sense we must do.

One of the best descriptions of this understanding of being called to something was written by Dag Hammarskjöld in his journal *Markings*. Many of us here will remember him as perhaps the greatest Secretary General of the United Nations in the history of that organization. He writes, "*I don't know who or what put the question. I don't even remember when it was put. But at some point, I said 'Yes' to Someone, or Something, and from that point on, my life, in self-surrender, has had a meaning and a goal.*" Following a call involves hearing a summons from beyond ourselves, and giving ourselves over

to someone or something larger than ourselves, that is for the good of other people. The test of any genuine call is that it serves a goal larger than our own self-interest. In doing so, we discover a larger meaning and sense of ultimate purpose in our own lives. Making a lot of money may be a goal for many people, but it's hardly a calling. However, occasionally there are people who make a lot of money who begin to discern a call that moves them to use that money to bring good to others. Bill Gates is an obvious case in point.

In some theological traditions, including the Reformed tradition common to many of us, there has been an understanding that God has our lives all mapped out for us. Or as the old Campus Crusade for Christ slogan that many of us encountered in college, put it, "God has a wonderful plan for your life." Discovering and following that plan was, according to our pastors and teachers and youth leaders, the most important thing any of us could do.

But I discovered, as I suspect most of us discover, that it's not quite that simple. For one thing, it's been a very long time since I've been able to believe in a God who is some sort of Super Person, sitting in some heavenly realm, poring over the divine blueprint containing all the details of my life and sending out some sort of mysterious, invisible and inaudible instructions into my mind that make me choose this path instead of that one, or take this action instead of that one or make this decision instead of that one. If that's how "God's wonderful plan for our lives" works, then either God isn't very good at making good plans or at communicating that plan to us, because there are a lot more messed up and confused people out there than there are those who have a clear sense of vocation or calling. I've always had the feeling that a lot of us stumble into what we're doing rather than following a clear and controlling vision. The fact that we do often seem to stumble onto a particular path may even be why the notion of some divinely ordained destiny is so appealing to

us; we don't feel that we really chose this path, so therefore, God or Fate or Karma must have decided it for us.

But there was something valid in what my pastors and youth leaders and teachers were saying. And that was the part about the need to be intentional about seeking to hear God's call, and willing to answer yes when we did hear it. The difference between simply living and living out of a sense of calling or vocation is largely a matter of intentional listening and seeking and a willingness to follow where that quest takes us in order to serve others.

In both of our lessons today, we see this illustrated, though in very different ways. Isaiah was an aristocratic member of the court of King Uzziah in the 8th century BCE. Uzziah had reigned for fifty years, but now he had died, and the implications for the kingdom of Judah, caught between the expansionist empire of Assyria to the East and the chaotic turmoil in Egypt to the south were enough to worry anybody, like Isaiah, who was part of the government and who could anticipate the potential for disaster following the death of a strong, if not always good, king.

That's the background against which we hear this story of Isaiah attending a worship service in the temple. He's there for the same reason, no doubt, that most people go to worship—to place himself in the presence of the divine and to seek to understand his own life in relation to that divine realm or presence. While at worship, he has a powerful spiritual, even mystical, experience. He has a vision of the majesty and holiness of God. *"I saw the Lord, high and exalted on a throne, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs attended him, and they called out, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of God's glory.'"*

Isaiah is so overwhelmed by this awesome sense of God's presence that he really tunes into it with his inner ear, and hears God asking *"Whom shall I send? Who will speak my*

message of warning and hope to my people?” And in a moment of self-surrender and commitment, Isaiah responds, “*Here am I. Send me.*”

Now, I’ve got to confess that I’ve never had an experience quite like that. I don’t imagine that there was anything special about the worship service that day that explains that experience of what Rudolph Otto called the *mysterium tremendum*, that feeling of holy awe that accompanies a sense of being in the presence of the divine. I do know other people who have had similar sorts of similar visionary or mystical experiences, sometimes even in worship services, though hardly every Sunday. I’m not denying the reality or importance of such experiences; they are often life-changing experiences for those who have them. But I rather think they may be more common to certain types of personality or temperaments than to others.

Perhaps that’s why I relate better to the story of Peter and the other disciples in our Gospel lesson this morning. They didn’t have the quite the powerful, mystical epiphany that Isaiah had in the temple— a vision of the Lord, “*high and lifted up,*” a profound religious experience. They recognized their calling to follow Jesus in the midst of a frustrating workday. They had just fished all night on the Sea of Galilee without catching anything. It’s bad enough when you’re fishing for sport and come home skunked, but when it’s the way you make your living, it’s particularly frustrating and discouraging. I can imagine that Peter was probably not in all that great a mood of receptivity to Jesus’ suggestion that they turn around and go back out to deeper water and try casting their nets again.

But there is something that Peter and the other disciples have in common with Isaiah, and that is, that they already had some prior commitments that enabled them to recognize their calling when it came to them. Isaiah was at worship, putting himself intentionally in the presence of God and seeking to be open to God’s

leading. Peter and the others were already committed to following Jesus. We know this because of the way Peter addresses Jesus, even when he’s aggravated at what Jesus is asking him to do. He calls him Master, which is the address a disciple uses for the one he has committed himself to follow. He’s not responding to a stranger who just walked up the beach and made some ridiculous demand on him. He’s responding to someone whose authority he recognizes and with whom he is already in relationship, even if, before this incident, he may not have recognized the full shape and depth of what such a commitment to following might mean. I doubt, before this incident, that he had realized that his real calling was not to catch fish, but to catch people in the gospel net. Yet in both cases, Isaiah’s and Peter’s, the readiness, the intention to listen for God’s call was there as the precondition for discerning that call and for saying “Yes.”

Although I never knew her, I’d be willing to bet that when Hanley Denning went to visit the garbage dump in Guatemala City in the company of that Catholic nun, she never expected that it would totally change the direction of her life. Apparently she was getting ready to enter grad school at North Carolina for her doctorate in Social Work, but I’d also be willing to bet that she was already seriously thinking about how to make her life count for something larger than herself, so that, as she said, when she saw what was happening to those children on the garbage dump, she just knew that’s where she was supposed to invest her life. And what an investment it was, and continues to be!

While I don’t believe that there is some pre-ordained divine plan for each of our lives— a kind of template, already all mapped out that we simply become aware of, and then all the rest happens automatically in course, I do believe that each of us, at each stage of our lives, has a calling that we have to seek and discover by intentionally seeking it, and by having already

made some commitments about what we want our life ultimately to be about. It may seem to us, in the moment when we sense that call like a plan that was there all along waiting for us to find it, but in fact, it's really we who create the plan and pattern of our calling out of the variety of encounters, relationships, the serendipities, the accidents, the coincidences, the wrong turnings, the pitfalls, the stumbles, and all the other ingredients that are the stuff of our lives. Whether we find our life's larger meaning, whether we fully realize that calling when we hear it, depends on whether we have the courage to respond as Peter did by leaving his nets, or as Isaiah did, by responding, "*Here am I, send me.*"