

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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2nd Sunday of Advent
Luke 1:67-80

John's Call, Our Call

If ever there were someone born with vocational expectations, that would be this baby named John.

You know what I mean by "vocational expectations." More often, they are laid on sons, rather than daughters. In previous centuries, your father's trade would most likely become your trade, whether a cobbler, a blacksmith, or a weaver. And today, there are vestiges of that heritage. The son of a long line of bankers may be expected to become a banker. The eldest son of a farmer is often expected to take over the farm.

But few people have parents who sing their expectations in words which are recorded for generations to hear. Would this child be a priest, like his father? Zechariah had 9 months to ponder what this child of his old age would become, what he would do, who he would be in God's great plan. For 9 months, Zechariah was mute, not by his own choice. He was on a solitary silent retreat, with plenty of time to think about what Gabriel, the angel of the Lord, had told him, that this child of his would "make ready a people prepared for the Lord." It's as if Zechariah spent nine quiet months composing this beautiful, inspired song to tell the world, and lay it on John himself, what was expected of him.

"What will this child become?" Parents ask the same question, between feedings and diaper changes, when a child's personality emerges and talents become apparent, and when interests are nurtured in school. Will she be a rock star or a writer, will he be a scientist or an artist, a builder or a politician? And then we ask the child, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" For most of us, this is the question of vocation. When you are "adulting," as they say these days, what do you want to do in your work life?

But as we've been exploring the meaning of "call" this year in our church's life, we've uncovered many more dimensions to vocation than "what I want to be when I grow up." For a call is more than an internal desire, and more than a reasoned judgment about abilities, interests, educational needs, and opportunities. Our call as Christians begins with Christ, who elicits a response of faith. And by the Holy Spirit, we receive gifts to be used in God's great plan. The needs of the day, the communities of which we are a part and the constellation of our gifts all conspire to place calls upon our lives. Sometimes we hear the call from within, and sometimes insightful others speak it into our souls. Sometimes we gratefully leap in response, "here I am, Lord!", and other times we do all we can to ignore or deny or avoid the call. And sometimes the call is so far beyond what we ever expected or planned that all we can do is take a deep breath, and pray that God will guide us as we do what God and life ask of us.

I imagine that John had to take a lot of deep breaths, and pray many heartfelt prayers, to answer the call his father sang for him.

The beautiful song, known as the "Benedictus" for its first word in Latin, "Blessed," begins with praise to God. Zechariah rehearses the story of God's favor, the fulfillment of God's promises made for generations, from Abraham to the prophets. John's call is part of that long story, for John will be a prophet, too. The long-awaited Messiah, Savior, Anointed One, Christ is rising, and John's call is to clear

the way and make ready the people. The morning light is on the horizon, in the near time frame, soon the people will be set free, and God's plan calls for a prophet whose word will stir people to repentance and renew their hope. That will be John.

Often we struggle to see beyond the immediate situation we are in, but Zechariah sings the vision of God's future. It is the promise to John, the reason for John to answer this fearful call. Call it "motivation." God's promise is the conclusion and the culmination of Zechariah's song. *"By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

Okay, so this was John's call, John's vocation. Give him credit for his eccentric way of responding, going out into the desert to preach and baptize. Give him credit for recognizing Jesus as Messiah and calling people to shift their attention away from him to Jesus. Kudos to John for standing up to wicked King Herod and his evil wife Herodias, by speaking truth to power and sacrificing his life for it. Yes, there are times when the prophet's vocation intersects with the political world. John should be remembered for his courage and conviction. His call was unique, just as our calls are unique. But is it restricted to the pages of the Bible, enclosed in the covers of the holy book, just a story from long ago?

Later this morning an elder of our church will renew vows for service on the session. She will promise, among other vows, "to accept the scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word to me." Everyone in this room who has been ordained as elder, deacon, or minister of Word and sacrament has made this same promise. So it's pretty obvious that we can't keep John's story, or John's call, confined to the past or stuck inside the holy book. There is something of John's call in our calls, because this is God's Word to us.

John's call gives us a different way to think about our relationship to Christ. Usually we talk about "following" Jesus. Or walking "with" Jesus. "I want Jesus to walk with me, all along my pilgrim journey," the spiritual goes. The idea of going before Christ is a bit scary. Preparing the way? Telling people they need to repent? Speaking of God's coming salvation? That doesn't sound like what we've come to associate with being Presbyterian!

How might we do this? How might John's call also be our own?

Last Sunday evening at our Advent event, a variety of people read short scripts in which people from the stories of the Bible told of their call. So Isaiah spoke of being God's prophet when the people needed a warning, and then when they needed hope. John spoke of calling people back to God's ways, and knowing he was part of God's story that day that Jesus came to him to be baptized. Then a third person read a script from a contemporary person, a 21st century person whose call contained echoes of the Biblical stories. Isaiah and John's counterpart in today's world told how he overcame a fear of public speaking when he became passionate about ending homelessness, all because of one encounter with a homeless man who, it turned out, was like him in so many other ways. The call to be God's prophet is not so far away from the tugs we might feel on our hearts when we see injustice, when we are moved by compassion, when we are compelled to step out of our comfort zone for the sake of others.

We just need a motivation. And Zechariah gives voice to a motivation which will never grow old. Yes, Jesus came in John's lifetime, and John was part of his story. But the story isn't over. The world is still needing redemption, still waiting for its Savior to complete the story of salvation, still longing and

hoping for its enemies to be vanquished and God's reign to triumph. The kingdom of God is still breaking into the world. And God's promises are still sure.

For by the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. . .

Who do you know sitting in darkness, needing light?

Is it the friend who is struggling with addiction, the guy on the corner by Walmart holding a sign, or the person who didn't make it to church today because of depression? Is it the family worn down by grief, or the elderly person living alone, or the hospital patient who has just received a grim diagnosis? Is it the child in a refugee camp, traumatized by war, or is it the young person without immigration status who is living in the shadows for fear of deportation? All around us are people who need to hear that our God is a God of tenderness and mercy, who promises light to those who live in darkness. All around us, and we ourselves, need the hope of God's coming into the world. And if we believe that Christ is God coming into the world, then we are already called to be part of God's story and bear our witness to the kingdom of God breaking into the world.

We are called to be people of hope.

For by the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Who do you know who needs peace?

Is it the tormented soul who sits in a jail cell? Or the one just released who isn't sure where she will sleep tonight? Is it the child whose parents are fighting all the time, or the parent who is struggling with a troubled teenager? Is it someone on the other side of the world, say, in North Korea or the Congo or Jerusalem, whose fear is escalating daily because they know they could be the next victim of strife they didn't create?

We are called to be people of peace.

For we, like John, have a calling to go into the world, with the word and witness of the not-yet-fully-here reign of God, a reign of justice and love and peace. We are called to speak the prophetic word, to share our hope, and to walk in the ways of peace. We are called to make a way, for Christ is behind us. And thankfully, he is also beside and before us.

Are you motivated yet? John's call can be our call when we share the vision of God's mercy giving hope and peace to the world, and dare to play our part in God's ongoing story.

So take a deep breath. Pray for God's guidance. And trust the promise. God has big plans for us, vocational expectations that we will be part of God's story.