

Wesley United Methodist Church  
January 22, 2017  
Who Are You? Claim Your Vocation  
Text: Isaiah 49:1-4  
Matthew 4:12-23

As I was thinking about the theme for today, of “claiming your vocation” it was hard not to think about events happening in our country – of the inauguration of a new president two days ago and of confirmation hearings for his choices to head various departments. In fact, as I read one of the commentaries published 15 years ago, speaking of one of the Scripture readings, it talked about the hope we often have at the inauguration of a new president and how sometimes that hope is fulfilled and other times it becomes a disappointment.

Today’s scriptures are all about the beginning of a new way, a new life, a new vocation, a new ministry. The Isaiah passage is about the heralding of a new king (whether real or ideal) and the hope that this would bring to Israel. The passage is also often frequently applied to Jesus – and Matthew uses some of the prophet’s words when he describes the beginning of Jesus’ ministry.

After telling about Jesus’ birth, the visit of the Magi, and the flight to Egypt, Matthew skips to Jesus’ adulthood where he tells us about Jesus being baptized by John – his cousin, where a voice from heaven proclaims Jesus to be “My son, whom I dearly love.”

After being baptized, Jesus went out into the wilderness where he faced temptation. The nature of the temptations focused on who Jesus would be – what would guide his life and ministry. They began with “Since you are God’s Son” and offered him tempting ways to live out that role. Would he use his status to work a miracle and turn stones into bread to

satisfy his hunger or would he depend upon God? Would he test God to prove his identity by protecting him from injury? Jesus response was that he would not put God to the test. Would he accept the temptation to transfer his loyalty from God to Satan and gain great power? Once again Jesus quoted scripture and refused to follow or trust anyone other than God. Jesus' response to these temptations would define his life and his ministry. Jesus claims his vocation, his calling, who he is.

We come then to today's reading where Jesus has learned that John has been arrested and Jesus' response is to go to Galilee and settle in Capernaum. With this Matthew lets us know that Jesus ministry will be a ministry to all people. He has set as the center for his ministry a place that Isaiah called "Galilee of the Gentiles."

There was great hope for a Messiah, for someone to come and free Israel from Rome and that likely only intensified with John's arrest. Rather than stepping forward and declaring himself to be the Messiah and following the path that many of his contemporaries were hoping for, Jesus made it clear that his kingdom would be one of nonviolence.

This is where Matthew quotes the prophet Isaiah, that the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned. Light and darkness are a familiar theme in Jesus' ministry. Jesus ushers in an age in which people will move toward the realm of light and away from the darkness.

Jesus called for people to "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near." Repent means to change your direction. Jesus' message is not, "repent so you won't go to hell" but rather a call to repent, to change direction in response to God's action. God is making a new world. Jesus

is calling for people to change their direction and get a new sense of direction and purpose to become part of that new world.

As Jesus walks along the sea of Galilee, Matthew tells us that he calls to Andrew and Peter, fishermen, to come follow him. “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. A little further along, Jesus issued the same invitation to James and John the sons of Zebedee. Immediately they also left their nets and followed him.

This call was both a command and a promise. It is a command to follow Jesus and also a promise that they would become fishers of people. It is a promise that they will take part in God’s work. It is the same promise that Jesus has been offering to those he called to repent – change direction – because the kingdom of heaven has come near, become part of this new thing that God is doing.

This is more than a story about Peter, Andrew, James, and John being called to follow Jesus. This is really a call about each and every one of us being called to be a disciple, to be part of the kingdom of God. This is about each of us being called to follow Jesus.

How have you experienced God’s call in your life?

There are some who receive a sudden call – like Peter, Andrew, James, and John to suddenly leave everything and follow Jesus. For many, maybe most of us, that call is gradual – or at least our realization of it is gradual. We slowly become aware that God is calling to us.

God is calling to each of us, not just by name, but to a special purpose. How do we know what it is that God is calling us to?

The simple answer is that God is calling us to be disciples and that begins simply by following Jesus. But, where to begin? How do I follow?

George MacDonald in Creation in Christ wrote, “I will tell you. Get up, and do something the Master tells you; so make yourself his disciple at once. Instead of asking yourself whether you believe or not, ask yourself whether you have this day done one thing because he said, Do it, or once abstained because he said, Do not do it. It is simply absurd to say you believe, or even want to believe in him, if you do not anything he tells you. If you can think of nothing he ever said as having had an atom of influence on your doing or not doing, you have too good ground to consider yourself no disciple of his.

“But you can begin at once to be a disciple of the Living One by obeying him in the first thing you can think of in which you are not obeying him. We must learn to obey him in everything, and so must begin somewhere. Let it be at once, and in the very next thing that lies at the door of our conscience!”

I’ve always found this to be helpful. Simply begin somewhere and go from there. When we decide to follow Jesus, we don’t know where that is going to lead us, but we know that we do not walk the road alone.

I think that Jesus’ invitation and call to Peter, Andrew, James, and John showed something important about the way we are called. They were called to “fish for people.” They were fishermen. They knew how to fish; and they were good at it.

I believe that when God calls us, that call is specific to who we are. Certainly, we are all called to be compassionate, honest, caring, and so forth, because there are qualities that really should go with being a follower of Christ.

However, in God's wisdom, we are all created differently. The things that interest me, are likely different than the things that interest you. I believe that God knows that and calls to us in our interest.

I looked but could not find a brief quote that has always spoken to me. It asked the question of how we know what God desires for our life. Essentially, it said, that somewhere deep in our heart, God has planted a desire, a hope. That hope, that desire that is so secret and so wonderful that you almost can't believe it is God's desire for you.

When I was a child, I played church. Is anyone surprised by that? However, I had two careers before I finally answered the call to parish ministry. I was a nursery school teacher and I loved that. I was an engineering assistant and did mechanical drafting, developed quotes for jobs and worked with production scheduling and expediting. It was a good job, and made use of some of the things that interest me – especially math and organizing, but that was something still tugging at my heart.

When I was 12 years old, I wanted to be a pastor, but I was discouraged from considering that. God doesn't give up and from time to time in my life, I still felt that God was calling me to something different. Eventually, I realized that if I was claiming to be a disciple of Jesus and was refusing to follow when I knew God was calling me, then I really wasn't being a disciple.

When finally I became a pastor, I remember feeling a little guilty about receiving a pay check for doing something that I loved doing more than anything I could imagine. By the way, I've gotten over feeling guilty, but am still grateful that I have the joy of serving God by doing what I love more than anything else.

For each of us, there is something in our hearts that is God whispering to us. Some may have been privileged to earn their living doing what they know that God has been calling them to do.

Large numbers of people, however, may enjoy their jobs, or make a good living but still feel that something is missing. When we talk about claiming our vocation (which comes from the Latin *vocare*, to call) we are talking about the work a person is called to by God. That may or may not be how you earn your living. It may be completely separate from your career or job. If you are retired, you may have the freedom to respond in a different way to something that God is calling you to do.

Maybe you've always thought about teaching children but have never done it. Now could be the time to explore that. Perhaps you've always had a passion for people who are hungry or homeless. You may find that being a volunteer in a food pantry, soup kitchen or homeless shelter may be where God is calling you to be.

A few years ago I was at a church and the four or five people there were telling me that they were too old and too tired to help their church do anything more. I asked one of the women what she liked to do. She told me that three days a week, she went to the local animal shelter and spent a couple of hours petting the animals that were there. I said to her, "well that seems to me like a wonderful way to take care of some of God's creation that really needs some love." Her face lit up. She had never thought that her faithful attention to the homeless or abused animals could be a way of serving God. By the way, a couple of years later, that tiny church started a pet pantry. Once a month, they were open and distributed pet food and supplies to people who were having difficulty feeding their beloved pets. I think that she found her vocation, her passion, and heard God's call to her.

I tell this, simply to illustrate that there are many many ways that God may be calling us to follow. I can't imagine myself going to an animal shelter to pet animals but that's not where God is calling me. It was where God was calling that woman; it was something she loved and something she could do. Once she also identified this as a way that she could serve God, it brought additional joy to her life and led to a ministry that made a difference in her community.

I want to invite you to open the Faith We Sing to #2242, "Walk with Me". We are going to sing this one verse at a time as we recall people from scripture who were called and followed.

How many times in our lives have we said, "no" when God was calling us. How many times have we said, "Not me, please send someone else." Moses did that and then went on to do great things, leading his people from Egypt, through the wilderness for 40 years and to the edge of the promised land. Why? Because he finally said yes. (Sing verse 1)

Peter willingly left his fishing to go fish for people. Peter was impetuous, hard-headed. Yet, he became the "rock" upon which the church was established. He was a man who tried hard. Sometimes he succeeded and sometimes he failed. Three times he denied that he even knew who Jesus was but after Jesus' resurrection, Jesus asked him three times, "Do you love me?" and told him to "Feed my sheep." (Verse 2)

There are many legends about Mary Magdalene. She was a leader among many women who followed Jesus and provided for his ministry out of their resources. She was a person from whom demons had been cast out. She was one of the few who stayed with Jesus to witness the crucifixion and was the first person to see Jesus alive and to testify to his

resurrection. She is named at least 12 times in the Gospels, more than most of the disciples. (Sing verse 3)

God is calling each of us to some ministry. What desire or passion has God placed in your heart? Where is God calling you to be present and to make a difference? Some people are great at visiting people who are shut-in, or lonely, or sick. Others bring love to people who are hungry at a soup kitchen or food pantry. Some people knit or crochet prayer shawls or baby hats or other items that bring hope and love to others. How will you respond to God's call in your life? (Sing verse 4)