

Encountering God

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Scriptures: Judges 6:11–24; Psalm 85; I Corinthians 15:1–11; Luke 5:1–11

What is the song lyric you have misheard the most egregiously?

For my middle school carpool, I was the captain of the radio, well at least when my mom was driving. Keenly interested in music, I had become obsessed with just about every detail of songs that I heard on the radio. I could tell you the names of band members, recite lyrics, and tell you what songs were about. Whether I was right or wrong, my youthful enthusiasm guaranteed I was going to tell you.

And I would of course make errors, but my worst may have been when Pearl Jam's "Better Man" came on the radio one day. I proudly proclaimed from the front seat to all who would listen that this song was by the Dave Matthews Band and that you could tell because of the distinctiveness of Dave Matthew's lead vocals. I then proceeded to sing the refrain of the song with a confidence only available to middle school boys, wrongly belting out the actual lyric of "Can't find a better man," as what I thought I was hearing: "Can't find the pyramid." One day, when I was unlucky, the radio DJ did what DJs do, and told us the actual artist and song title as the final notes wrapped up. My error was plain for all to see. I not only didn't know who was singing to us, I also didn't know what he was singing.

Today our lectionary readings give us three accounts of the Lord calling his people to do his will. Gideon, Paul, and the Apostles were all called to a particular vocation and received that calling verbally from the Lord himself or his messenger. What does it mean to be called by God? Now there is a loaded question! "God called me..." is the beginning of a sentence that can go a lot of ways. It can ring true and it can reveal itself to be completely empty. When "God called me..." is followed by a true word from the Lord, it can change the world. When "God called me..." is followed by exactly what we wanted to do anyway, we are committing the error I committed from the passenger seat of my mom's minivan, hand on the radio dial. We are mis-hearing God's call or simply making it up.

What does it mean to be called by God?

How do we know that it is God who calls us?

As we've alluded to, there are three callings in our scriptures today. The first thing I want us to notice in these passages is the relation between God's calling and his presence. For Gideon, the text is a little ambiguous in the naming of the figure that appears before him. I am going to assume it is an angel of the Lord, but in any case God's presence is there, whether God himself or through his messenger. Both Paul and the first disciples have an encounter with Jesus, the disciples at the beginning of his ministry as they were in their fishing boats, and Paul as he was on the road to Damascus.

Some of us want to seek God's calling without first seeking his presence. We tend to be results oriented and we just want to cut to the chase and get our marching orders. We are so eager to do what God wants that we think we can just get the information and skip over being in his presence. It may seem more efficient at the time, but we can't cut ourselves off from knowing God in an effort to follow him. To grasp at calling without seeking God's presence is to take from the tree of knowledge when God has called us to wait and get the knowledge we need from him.

So with this idea of encountering God being central to our understanding of his calling to us, let's look at these stories of calling from our readings this morning.

First we come to Gideon in Judges 6. Gideon enters the story in pretty pedestrian and frankly embarrassing fashion. We have just heard in the narrative of the victory of Deborah and Barak, and we may be expecting for God to raise up another mighty judge to deliver his people from the Midianites, who are the ones revealed to be Israel's oppressors in the first verses of Judges 6. Well, when we find Gideon, he is anything but that. The text gives us the note that Gideon was working with his wheat harvest in the wine press. Typically, this chore would be done out in the open air, so that the wind could blow away the chaff during the process of separating it from the wheat kernel, making the job of sorting out the usable part of the plant easier.¹ But Gideon is down in the winepress, chaff all around him. He is afraid of the Midianites. He is afraid they will steal his grain, his family's livelihood and the guarantee that he himself will eat. He also tries to convince the angel that he is the wrong guy for the job of delivering Israel... "Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the

¹ Comfort, et al. *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, Judges 6:11

least in my father's house." Gideon displays what will become his trademark hesitancy, asking God's messenger for a sign that it is indeed God who calls him - a pattern Gideon will repeat again at the end of this chapter. And yet, God's messenger calls Gideon, hesitant, cowardly, with an inferiority complex, a mighty warrior. It is indeed Gideon who God has decided to visit and call.

Gideon didn't simply think that he was unworthy and not ready to do what God wanted him to do, there were some real issues that would continue to get in his way, his hesitancy and need for a sign over and over again chief among them. But get this: God still chose him.

You may have some perceived weaknesses along with real areas of growth. That doesn't disqualify you from encountering God and hearing his voice. God finds us and calls us. He does so on purpose wherever we are.

We don't need to change our family or our place in it to encounter God or be used by him, like Gideon thought he needed to be changed. We don't have to have all the skills we will need to receive a calling from God. You don't have to change where you came from or who God made you to be to do the work he's given you to do in the world. He made you that way at that time in that place on purpose.

And also, as the Apostle Paul would tell us when it comes to our choices, an encounter with God will show us the ways in which we do need to change. The places where we do need to repent.

In many ways, the man formerly known as Saul was the opposite of Gideon. Paul writes elsewhere that he was a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee with regards to the Law. Paul was the class valedictorian and moral exemplar all in one. Far from hiding in a winepress, he burned with zeal for the God of Israel. To any passive observer, and probably to Paul himself, he was the right man for God's job.

But notice how Paul's encounter with God emphasizes the need for repentance: "For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." Paul was on his way to Damascus to round up Christians for arrest. He had watched on in approval as Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned to death. If Gideon didn't feel he was worthy because of his station in life, Paul was unworthy because of the sin in his life. But Jesus appears to him anyway. And because Paul repents, he is given the great mission of bringing the Gospel to the Gentiles.

Encountering God will reveal to us our sinfulness and inability to stand before him, but it does not prevent him from coming to us. But if we are to receive a calling from the Lord, our encounter with God must spur a change in our lives and our work so that they are brought into harmony with the theme of the gospel. Sin gets us out of tune and we must turn from our dissonance in order to play in concert with God's will. Encountering God is our opportunity to hear again that true note of his voice, highlighting not just the beauty of God's goodness, but how far off we are from that goodness. St. Paul needed a tune up, and we call him St. Paul because he did the work.

If Gideon's call shows us that God can use us regardless of who we are, and Paul's calling shows us that the right response to an encounter with God is to repent, then Peter and the other Apostles' encounter with Jesus on the shores of Galilee shows us the abundance that comes with a life lived under the calling of the Lord.

When Peter hears Jesus' unsolicited fishing advice, he tries to be polite, but it is pretty obvious what he is thinking - there is no way this non-fisherman, as well as he speaks, knows my job better than me. And yet he obeys. You know the rest of the story. When Peter sees the miraculous catch of fish, he knows he is in the presence of the Holy, and like the prophets before him, he knows that his sins make him unworthy. He knows to do instantly what Paul had to learn. "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." Peter is ready for his calling. So Jesus gives it to him. The abundance of life that Peter will experience won't be about something as trivial as material abundance - though in this catch of fish Jesus has very clearly demonstrated that he was capable of meeting material needs. No, the scope is so much more grand. Peter's calling will be to build a kingdom made up of people caught in the love of God. And the blessings and the burdens will be more than he can even imagine.

Three encounters with God, and three calls. The three characters give us almost a track of spiritual maturity. Gideon is so wrapped up in worldly categories of who is worthy and where his next meal is coming from that he doesn't think God is able to call him. Paul almost certainly thought himself worthy of the call of God, but needed a few days of blindness to see that in order to follow God's pathway, he had some repenting to do. Peter is ready for the call, recognizing his sinfulness the moment he

sees he is in the presence of the divine, and so he is given a great task, and the power to be sustained on the journey.

When was the last time you encountered God? You may be thinking of these three stories, well that is all fine and good, I will wait until God shows up in my backyard. And indeed, God can choose to show up in whatever manner he chooses. Gideon met the angel of the Lord as he was working on his family farm. Jesus appeared to Paul in a vision of blinding light. Jesus in the flesh came and interrupted Peter's workday. These stories of tangible encounters may give you a feeling of missing out. "If Jesus would just appear to me like he did to them, then I would know that I had encountered God."

But hear this. We encounter God each week, at a table, with bread and wine. We hear our Lord's words every week in the reading of the Gospel. Do not think that God thinks you not worthy of being present to you, for as we will hear in just a few minutes, he says of these things: "This is my body; this is my blood." Remember that the curtain that separated God's presence off from the rest of the Temple was split in two the moment that Jesus breathed his last breath on the cross. Remember that the Holy Spirit was poured out on those who believed at Pentecost and on you at your baptism. I venture to say we are in no way short on God's presence, though perhaps we are short on our recognition of God's presence, in our asking for God's presence to be made known to us.

So let our time in the presence of God result in hearing his calling for us. We learn from Gideon that it comes to us regardless of our perceived inadequacies. We learn from Paul that it shines a light on the ways in which we need to change. We learn from Peter that it comes with the abundance to sustain us in our journey.

It says of these first apostles that after they had brought in their boats full of fish, they left everything and followed Jesus. They did so because they recognized that nothing could be more important than the calling they had just received. They, in a word, were right. "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people."