



This Call Is for You

TEXT
Genesis 12:1–3

October 18, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

In thinking about today's message, I have been reflecting on what I learned from my mom. She taught me to clean my plate because there were kids who didn't have food to eat. When I offered to mail them my asparagus, she thought that wasn't as funny as I thought it was.

She taught me that brushing my teeth before bed was not an optional activity. It was the only way to ensure the tooth fairy would come when they fell out — because the tooth fairy had no use for dirty teeth. She was always telling me to do this or that. I'll come back to that.

God is a calling God. It happens over and over and over again.

God called Jeremiah: *You will be my prophet.*

Isaiah was in worship: *I saw the Lord high and lifted up. Whom shall I send? Here am I, Lord; send me.*

For Mary, the call came from an angel out of nowhere: *The Lord has found favor with you. She says, Let it be with me according to your word.*

It's not always easy to be called by God. Just ask Jonah. He was called to preach to his enemies in Nineveh. Paul was called to preach all over the Ro-

man world. Onesimus was called to carry the Gospel word to his master, Philemon. And fishermen were called just to come and follow.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was called to go back to Germany during World War II. *If I'm not with my people while they suffer, I can't be with them when the war is over.* Oscar Romero was called to stand up for those invisible to most of the world. Margaret Towner and Rachel Henderlite were the first women ordained in the Presbyterian world. That was a calling to the whole church.

But before any of these, Abraham was called to go to a land that I will show you. This is a significant moment in the biblical story.

If you were here last Sunday, then you will remember we spoke of God as creator of the heavens and the earth and 300 sextillion stars that form the universe. We said last week that God's choice to create was God's first act of love, God's first act of grace, because it revealed God's desire that there be a world.

In this moment, what God creates is the Jewish people.

The call of Abraham and Sarah marks the beginning of the Jewish story. Here God chooses to work through a particular peo-

ple. It is not that some people are more important than others. It's not that. God's eye is still on the whole world. The sole purpose of this people is to be a blessing to all the nations. It shows us that God chooses to work through ordinary people.

Perhaps you have a list of folks through whom God has worked in your life. God is a calling God. Do you feel that God has called you to anything? Before you settle on that, let's think about what it means to be called.

Frederick Buechner describes *calling* this way. He says "The place God calls you is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deepest hunger meet."¹ That's absolutely right, sometimes. You have experienced that or heard others talk about it. Our youth go to the Dominican Republic for spring break, and they come back with life-changing stories — and primarily, it is their lives that have been changed.

The buses from Operation Breakthrough were here this week. This provided a few moments to sit with a child and read a book. And for some of these children, it seems to be a high point in their week. And for those of you who provide the laps and

the reading, it no doubt was a high point. I don't know if you thought about it as a calling, but it wouldn't be an inappropriate word to use.

We know what Buechner is talking about. *Where my deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet, God shows up.*

But we have to be honest that when it comes to calling, our deep gladness is optional. Just ask Jonah. When God called him, he raced in the opposite direction. But after a weekend fishing trip, which provided an opportunity for further reflection, he decided to be obedient.

Just ask Jeremiah. He found little gladness in being the prophet of judgment.

Just ask Jesus in the Gethsemane garden. Jesus prays, *I do not want what you want.*

Sometimes calling is just tied to the world's deep hunger. And our gladness is optional. Calling is not first about my fulfillment. It's about my responsibility.

At least that's how my mother understood it. When I got a little older, she told me to write thank you notes for people who did nice things for me. She said I was to always address adults with respect. "Yes, Sir." "No, Ma'am." That's just the way you talked to adults. She taught me that 11:10 was not the same thing as 11:00 when it came to curfew; and just because it was my car didn't mean it had to stay my car. She could be clear about things like that.

Sometimes I thought she should not worry about all the rules and just let me live my life.

It was my life, I would tell her. I'll come back to that.

The calling of God is not usually to do something in particular, like write thank you notes — or even take a particular job. Sometimes, I think, God can call you to do a particular work. But the call of God is not often a call to a particular task or a particular job; but rather, the call of God is to see life differently.

Abraham was not just called to take a trip. He was specifically called to leave everything behind: *Go from your home and your kindred and your father's house.* That's not just a geographical journey. Abraham was not called to leave a *place*, so much as a *worldview*. Leaving his father's house is more than geography. It's a call to leave behind the assumptions of what life is about.

My friend and teacher, Tom Long, was a Southern Presbyterian who was called to teach at Princeton Seminary. He wrote about that experience in a way that caused me to laugh out loud. He described a conversation that every person from the South has had a million times. It happens this way.

Someone visits a friend. The person being visited asks, "What may I bring you to drink?" To which the visitor says, "Oh, don't go to any trouble." Now if you are not from the South, you may think that the visit proceeds without beverages. But a Southerner knows that "Don't go to any trouble" is actually code. "Don't go to any trouble" actually means, "Yes, I would like something."

So the hostess says, "It's no trouble. I've got coffee, tea or coke." That's what Southerners call pop or soda. It's all coke.

Knowing the code, the visitor then says, "Well, I'll just have what you are having." Which means, "Have you already brewed the coffee?"

"It's no trouble. The tea and coke are in the fridge, and the coffee is brewed."

"Then I'll have coffee."

"You want cream and sugar?"

"Oh, don't bother," which means a little cream.²

Long says if you visit in Jersey and ask, "Would you like something to drink?" the response is, "Yes, I'd like some cranberry juice." It's not just a move to a new geography; it is a move to a new way of being.

The calling of God is much like that. I know you have thought this is what the world is about, but I will show you a more excellent way. Calling is a responsibility, and calling is less about what you do and more about how you see the world and your place in it. But more than any of this, calling is a gift.

The calling of God reflects the generosity of God because it declares that your life matters. It means that the God who created the heavens and the earth is paying attention to you, to your life, to the choices you make — and they matter.

My mother taught me that the Bible has no chance at all of being the word of God unless you study it. She taught me that playing baseball after supper was optional, but finishing my homework was not. She taught

me that I was going to church and whether I got anything out of it was really not required. I would go until I learned how to get something out of it.

My mom had a lot of rules. And she was always watching — even when I thought she wasn't watching. She had eyes in the back of her head. She did! I sometimes wished that she would just ease up. She should just let me live my life; it's my life. But as far as she was concerned, I was called. I have a way of being in this world. I didn't really see it as a gift — at least not for a while.

I've told you about this moment before. I hope you don't mind my repeating it to you. When I was in high school, I worked selling shoes in the mall. I left work and was driving home on I-285 in Atlanta. It had been misting all day long, and everything was slick. A few cars in front of me locked up. There was a lot of swerving, and I ended up being number three in a four-car pileup.

No one was hurt. There were lots of blue flashing lights. I asked a policeman if I could call my mother. I walked down the embankment to a Union 76 station and stood in one of those Clark Kent phone booths and dialed. She answered and I said, "Mom."

I don't know how it is that moms can tell, but they can. I just said, "Mom." And she said, "Tell me where you are. I'll be right there." She didn't say, "What did you do this time? How could this happen?" There was no, "I've told you to be more

careful. Do you have any idea how this will affect your insurance?" There was none of that, just "Tell me where you are. I'll be right there."

Here's what I'm trying to say today. The reason my mother paid attention to my eating habits and my attitude, the reason she paid attention to my study habits and my church attendance, is because she loved me. And because she loved me, how I lived my life mattered to her. Sometimes it mattered to her more than it did to me.

That's why God calls you. Your life matters to God, and because God loves you, how you spend your day matters to God — perhaps more to God than it does to you.

You are called like Peter was called to come and follow by the sea, and maybe on the sea. You are called like Mary was to trust that grace can be born in your life. You are called like Paul was to tell the truth that you know.

God could say, "It's your life and I don't care what you do with it." But that would mean God doesn't love. You hear how impossible that is, don't you?

You are called. That's a gracious gift.

¹Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (1973), p. 95

²Tom Long, *The Senses of Preaching* (1988), p. 70

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.