

JANUARY 15, 2012: SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

I Samuel 3:3b-10,19 I Corinthians 6:13c-15a, 17-20 John 1:35-42

Both today and next week's first and third readings contain one of Scripture's most important pieces of literature: call narratives. Since Scripture's original readers were convinced they were especially called by God, these narratives were intended to provide them with some insight into the implications of that call.

Our I Samuel passage zeros in on two important aspects of being called. First, God can (and does) call the most unlikely individuals. Second, what should be our immediate response to such a call.

Samuel is a mere child, so young that the sacred author must defend the boy's confusion in pinpointing the caller: "At that time Samuel was not familiar with Yahweh, because Yahweh had not revealed anything to him as yet." Were I Eli the priest, I might be justifiably jealous that God's calling this child and not me. Yet, after the almost comic routine of mistaken identity, Eli is honest enough to instruct the boy about the proper procedure to follow when one receives such a divine call. "If you are called, reply, 'Speak, Yahweh, for your servant is listening.'"

Listening is essential when it comes to biblical and personal calls. I must always anticipate that God is actually calling me. I, like many of you, was brought up in a church in which emphasis was placed only on calls to the priesthood or religious life. I remember one teacher assuring us, "If you don't receive a call to be a priest or nun, then presume God is calling you to be married." In other words, only priests and nuns receive divine calls. Other people don't have to listen. Our sacred authors, who knew nothing of Christian priesthood or religious life, would simply conclude, "No wonder ordinary people receive no calls; no one is listening."

One of the most significant aspects of today's Johanine call of the first disciples is contained in the last line: "You are Simon the son of John; you will be called Cephas" - which is translated Rock." A biblical name change always signals a change in personality. From Abram to Simon and Saul of Tarsus, names are changed after calls are given and received. An invitation from God is also an invitation to become someone new. Almost always, an unnoticed dimension of our personality surfaces when we generously respond to God's call. Something up on the periphery of ourselves is now drawn down to the center of our lives.

That's why today's I Corinthians passage is so significant. Though it technically doesn't narrate a call, Paul presumes all in his community have received an invitation from the risen Jesus to imitate his dying and rising. Since they said, "Yes!" to that call, their "... bodies (have become) members of Christ." All followers of Jesus are part of the body of the risen Jesus. Further along in I Corinthians, the Apostle will go into greater detail about the individual parts of that body, but here he simply stresses the new moral responsibilities Christians have because of their oneness with the Christ and one another. When we sin, we're not just sinning against ourselves, we're also sinning against the body of Christ. We're accountable to all in the Christian community, to all who share that one body. Paul would never have understood a "me and Jesus" theology. To be "another Christ" is also to be one with all those "other Christs" out there.

Today's three sacred authors are not only trying to make us more alert to God's call in our own everyday lives, they're also concerned that we acknowledge the calls of others. There's a lot more to calls than just priesthood and religious life. If we're not conscious and respectful of divine calls all around us, the body of Christ simply isn't going to function as Christ intended it to function.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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JANUARY 22, 2012: THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Jonah 3:1-5,10 I Corinthians 7:29-31 Mark 1:14-20

It's clear from today's I Corinthians passage that, in many ways, early Christians felt they were called to turn the world upside-down. Paul couldn't express their conviction better. "From now on, let those having wives act as not having them, those weeping as not weeping, those rejoicing as not rejoicing, those buying as not owning, those using the world as not using it fully. For the world in its present form is passing away." The Apostle could easily have added, "And we Christians are the ones speeding up its passing."

We can find at least one clue to why followers of Jesus were responsible for the demise of the world as they knew it in the call narrative which comprises our gospel pericope.

Our seminary spiritual directors usually told us to hear this passage as Jesus calling his first four priests. The fishermen's response to Jesus' call should be our response to our call to priesthood. Our primary priestly work was to catch people and eventually lead them triumphantly into heaven.

There's one problem with such an interpretation. Scripture scholars constantly remind us, the biblical Jesus called no one to be a priest, as we know priesthood today. Mark's Jesus is calling his first four Christians, not his first four priests. It's a call on which any follower of Jesus can and must reflect. All of us have received it.

The evangelist certainly zeros in on the immediate and total response of the four. "Then they abandoned their nets and followed him . . . They left their Father Zebedee in the boat along with the hired men and followed him." No one said, "Check back with me next week; I'm a little busy right now." Nor did they agree to follow him part-time, returning to their boats regularly to still help their father and friends. Separation from their former life was instant and complete.

But two other aspects in the passage also stand out. First, in a world-altering way, people, not fish, were now to be at the center of their lives. "I will make you fishers of people." Neither their jobs or family attachments, were to stand in their way of properly relating with other human beings. Second, they leave the security of those jobs and family attachments for the sake of a person - not for an ideal picture of a better world or a new system of action - but for a real live person. They simply "... followed him." They couldn't be certain where he was leading them; that would only become clear through time.

The author of Jonah emphatically agrees with that last aspect of Mark's call theology. His runaway prophet has a real problem following Yahweh as a person. Of course, like most biblical writings, only by reading the book's three short chapters do we understand the author's message.

Almost every living being in the book eventually repents: the storm-tossed sailors, the residents of Nineveh and their animals - even Yahweh! The book's only unrepentant individual is Jonah. The prophet's furious because Yahweh doesn't carry through on his promise to destroy the city and its inhabitants. He's still angry when the book ends. Jonah reminds God that he was sent to preach destruction, not repentance, and defends his bolting to Tarsish by saying he suspected Yahweh would end up changing his mind. He refused to prophesy for such a "repentable" person. Jonah fronted for a concept of God, not the person of God.

My former teacher, the great Hans Walter Wolff - the world's expert on Jonah - once explained Yahweh's repentance by stating, "God doesn't have to be faithful to God's word, as long as God is faithful to God's people." One of the most important things I've learned in all my years of studying Scripture.

Both in Jesus and Yahweh, we're called to follow a person who puts people at the center of their existence. Those who have enough courage to imitate such a person will certainly turn the world upside-down.

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