

FEBRUARY 10, 2013: FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Isaiah 6:1-2a, 3-8 I Corinthians 15:1-11 Luke 5:11-11

It's impossible to overemphasize the importance of biblical "call narratives." They're at the heart of what it means to be a follower of God. The original Scripture readers would have gone beyond the actual narrative and applied the individual aspects of each call to themselves, helping them understand their own personal calls.

Whether the call, like Isaiah's, is to a specific ministry, or, like Simon's, a generic call to be another Christ, all calls contain the same basic elements.

First, the person called is overcome with unworthiness. Isaiah, encountering Yahweh, exclaims, "Woe is me, I am doomed! For I am a man of unclean lips." Simon, after the miraculous catch, falls at the feet of Jesus and says, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." Left to our own devices, no one is capable of carrying out the task to which she or he is called.

Second, Yahweh or Jesus steps in and either removes or ignores the unworthiness. One of Yahweh's seraphs touches Isaiah's lips with a burning coal and tells him, "See, now that this has touched your lips, your wickedness is removed, your sin purged." Jesus assures Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." Yahweh or Jesus supplies what the person called lacks.

Third, whoever is called makes a free, immediate decision to respond to the call. There's no force of fear involved. No one hesitates. Isaiah's response to Yahweh's question, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" is an instant, generous, "Here I am, send me!" In a parallel way, Simon and his fishing partners "... brought their boats to the shore, left everything and followed him." No excuses, no delays.

One need only read the last verses of Jeremiah 20 to discover how deeply some of God's "volunteers" eventually regret their decision to freely give themselves over to God's plan. Yet once that "ok" is given, it changes everything. One acquires a completely new value system. Isaiah's life now revolves around proclaiming Yahweh's word. Simon and his co-workers have relegated boats and fish to the background of their lives and are now focusing on people. They've done a 180 degree turn in what they formerly thought important.

That's why we must listen carefully to what Paul, in our I Corinthians passage, regards as "first importance" for people who follow Jesus. In one of our faith's earliest "kerygmas," the Apostle passes on a tradition which he himself received when he first converted to the faith of Jesus: "... That Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures; that he was buried; that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures; that he appeared" No matter where we are, what we do, or who we are, a Christian's life revolves around the conviction that the risen Jesus is here, living and working among us.

As we hear in the gospels, the historical Jesus' ministry revolved around showing people how God was present, working effectively in their lives. But after his own death and resurrection, his followers were convinced that he also was alive and working in their midst.

Though Paul provides us with two different lists of people to whom the risen Jesus appeared, his most important point comes with the statement, "Last of all, as to one born abnormally, he appeared to me."

I presume, if we daily respond to God and Jesus' calls in our lives, we should also be able to reflect on the times and places in which the risen Jesus has appeared to us.

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FEBRUARY 17, 2013: FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT
Deuteronomy 26:4-10 Romans 10:8-13 Luke 4:1-13

Serious readers of the Bible should always remember the late Dennis McCarthy's classic definition of biblical "canonicity." "These particular books are in our Bible," the Jesuit scripture scholar said, "because they've helped the most people over the longest period of time to understand their faith." Though it might surprise some, faith doesn't come from reading the Bible. Scripture kicks in only after we already believe. Our sacred authors presumed their readers shared the same faith they professed. Their goal in writing was not only to help their readers understand the implications of that faith, but also to let them know they weren't alone.

Experts in fear often remind us that the greatest fear humans experience is the fear of being alone. Research has shown that almost all our fears can ultimately be tracked down to that one basic fear. Most of us wouldn't fear death, for instance, if we knew we wouldn't have to go through it by ourselves. If we could be certain a loved one will one day walk us through the process, we wouldn't be near as fearful. That's why Ray Moody and Elizabeth Kubler Ross' research on the subject was so consoling. They assured us no one is alone at the moment of death.

Faith is also something we approach alone. It's an extremely unique experience. Though organized religion purports to be a community of believers, each believing member has not only taken a different road to reach faith, but also looks at faith's implications from a different perspective. That's why believing people eventually saved the specific writings which became our Scriptures. It assured them there were people out there who had traveled the same road and shared their perspective. They identified with the diverse sacred authors.

Notice, for instance, how smoothly Moses switches from the third person to the first in today's Deuteronomy reading. He instructs his people on what to say when they're offering the first fruits: "My father (Jacob) was a wandering Aramean who went down to Egypt with a small household...but there he became a nation great, strong and numerous. When the Egyptians maltreated and oppressed us, imposing hard labor upon us, we cried out to Yahweh" What had once happened to their ancestors was happening to them. All followers of Yahweh needed liberation.

In a similar way, how would Luke know which specific temptations Jesus experienced in the wilderness? Mark, whose gospel he copied, didn't list any. We presume, because he was writing for second and third generation other Christs, he simply gave the gospel Jesus the temptations they were undergoing; tendencies to only take care of people's physical needs, to grasp after power, to do the spectacular. He reasoned that if his readers were experiencing these temptations, then Jesus also must have experienced them.

It's clear from our Romans pericope that Paul believed faith in Jesus was the great leveler. No matter your culture, race or gender, sharing the faith of Jesus unified all people. "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek," he writes, "the same Lord is Lord of all, enriching all who call upon him."

No one person of faith can identify with the experiences of all our sacred authors. If that were our quest, we'd not only have to possess a split personality, we'd have to have hundreds of personalities. The reason our Bible is so thick is because there's no one way to faith, no one way of looking at that faith. It's a shame our Sunday readings only cover a small part of our Scriptures. Perhaps the part and author with which we can most identify is never proclaimed during a liturgy. We might actually have to read the whole book.

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