

The Soul's Calling

Peter JB Carman, January 16, 2011, Binkley Baptist Church
Isaiah 49:1-7; John 1: 29-42

I.

What is it to be called to a sacred purpose? The world looks in funny places for leadership. I am reminded of a “reality” TV show, based on the notion that the winner is the woman or man who can claw her or his way to the top of a pile of competitors, with the maximum use of alliance building, lying, irresponsibility, betrayal. Is this reality? Humanity has long had a love affair with ruthless success and personal ambition. Some look for inspiration to the builders of empires. Others look to leaders who spew venom and arouse their fears. Good leaders and examples are not easy to find--not if we mean women and men of broad vision and deep insight, ready to live out a sacred calling in a forbidding world.

Isaiah had a vision of sacred calling that was quite different from most notions of leadership. The Prophet wrote of a suffering servant-leader who does the will of God—brings light to all of humankind—nothing less. This mysterious individual was called before birth to a purpose bigger even than rescuing a suffering nation from captivity. This soul's calling included a sharp tongue, a polished arrow for truth-speaking, hidden for the right time in the shadow of God's hand.

In our other reading we find a second account of souls' calling. With the eyes of faith John saw a person touched by a spirit like a dove! This One placed his --John's--own sacred calling in perspective. This new messiah somehow drew out the sacred calling of those who had previously followed John...along with their relatives and friends. In and through Christ's calling, they found their own.

Scripture is full of passages that challenge us to examine our own souls, to ask the deep question, the life question: “What is MY calling?” They invite us as intentional gathered communities to ask collectively “What is OUR calling?”

II.

For people of faith, success, leadership, call it what you will, is a distinctly different kind of thing! Success is discerning the soul's call for a purpose bigger than we are. Faith is a basic willingness to accept the call. Leadership is a readiness to put all humanity first. But just what is that soul-filling call, today? When my children were in elementary school they learned a ditty that was fine as far as it went. “Martin Luther King was a civil rights leader...He had a dream...” But not a word about having been a minister. On this Sunday when we remember one of the most defining church leaders of the last century, Martin Luther King Jr., we can start by reflecting on what King felt the *church* needed to be about. The world may not have changed as much in the past fifty years as we would like to think.

In a sermon first published in 1963, King helped to recover what the soul's calling for these times is all about. We find his words hidden like a polished arrow, saved perhaps for this day a half century later:

The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority. If the church does not participate actively in the struggle for peace and for economic and racial justice, it will forfeit the loyalty of millions and cause [people]men everywhere to say that it has atrophied its will. But if the church will free itself from the shackles of a deadening status quo, and, recovering its great historic mission, will speak and act fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice and peace, it will enkindle the imagination of [hu]mankind and fire the souls of [humans]men, imbuing them with a glowing and ardent love for truth, justice and peace.

[--Martin Luther King Jr. from "A knock at midnight", in *Strength to Love*, 1963.]

We love to quote Martin Luther King Jr. for examples of stirring oration. Yet we need to look closely at what he said and what he stood for. We are forever in danger of homogenizing and watering down his message. It was all about peace and getting along, we like to say. Yet King's message retains an edge! He reminds us still that our calling is not mastery, nor slavish obedience to the authorities of our day. He insists we must together stand over against the state, the government, in a prophetic role that is both loving and critical. He uses words like *guide* and *critic* and *conscience*. Even more importantly, King told us then and still tells us that the church needs to lead, collectively, in a way that is renewed and consecrated and risky. He says in effect that we who claim the name of Christ must get back to the business for which God made the early church...the business of Isaiah, the business of John the Baptist and Jesus-- in other words the business of calling the world to “truth, justice and peace.”

You may kill the prophet but you cannot kill the prophetic call. King's fellow travelers on the road to justice did not all just give up! Oh some burned out or were bought out, let's be honest, but others did not give up! They took up pieces of the struggle. They worked for women's rights, for civil rights, for fair housing or improved education for inner

city youth, or fair labor practices, or for reform in the institutional church. And yet, almost forty-eight years after Dr. King published the words we just read aloud, we may well look around and wonder, just how much has yet to be done, and how much a deepening reactionary movement threatens to undo the limited progress made. And we wonder if much of the church might have slumped into silence and worse.

In such a time as this, we need to look once more for our calling – our collective calling as Christians, and, individually, deep within for the soul’s calling. We need to dare to believe that there is yet a God, looking still for spiritual leaders of the real kind, movement participants-- critics, prophets, poets, preachers, pray-ers, mystics, marchers, movers who will be unafraid to take part in the sacred movement for truth and justice and human freedom.... It is an ancient call: this was the same movement Jesus of Nazareth picked up from Isaiah the prophet and John the Baptist, long long ago.

III.

When John the Baptist met Jesus by the banks of the Jordan River, he did not know who to expect, or what that person would look like, but he had the ability to perceive what God was doing: he could perceive a spirit like a dove come down. When Simon Peter got introduced by his brother to a new teacher, he could not foresee his road in history. But he responded to the call.

When Claudette Colvin, a teenage girl, refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus, nine months before Rosa Parks, she had no masses of supporters to back her. She could not see what lay beyond her own singular act. But she responded to the call.

When Martin Luther King Jr. emerged on the scene over half a century ago, there was nothing obvious to indicate that this person would become the center of the whirlwind that was to become known as the civil rights movement. Yet there were those who were in the community of disciples of Jesus who had the capacity to see, to perceive that someone was needed-- and to believe that this person was chosen to help them. They were looking for a leader, and they believed God was looking too. It was ordinary people who gave King his calling.

Surely if ever the times called for soul-searching and fresh leadership, they do now. Many have wondered quietly why the church has been so inactive in the United States, in responding to our government's continued pursuit of fruitless and misguided war. God is calling for people of conscience who are not afraid to speak a word of truth, in love. God is asking you and me to speak up a little! In one of the wealthiest nations in the world, we experience deep divides between those who have and those who have not, those with access to education and to hope and those who are shut out still. What is your calling and mine? In a time when loud voices of hatred egg on violence—while many live in fear in neighborhoods ruled by violence—what is the soul’s calling? What sacred instrument has been kept hidden in us, since our mothers’ wombs, to be drawn out for this time?

This time cries for us to look deep and reexamine our soul, individually and collectively. If we take the notion of a sacred calling seriously, we must be willing to turn outward more firmly as well as inward more deeply. We must be willing in this congregation to reclaim forcefully our historic mission as a church founded on open acceptance of all human beings, arcing toward the kind of peace that can only be when sisters and brothers live justly and honorably together, rich and poor together, people of every color and caste, every orientation and nation and age.

IV.

What is our soul’s call? We do not know all the details in advance. We do know that leadership in the cause of justice and love is rarely a comfortable mantle. God does not choose folk by the same standards or for the same ends as the world does. There is a spirit like a dove that comes to call upon children, youth, women and men, for purposes far beyond our imaginings. God calls us out of anonymity into the harsh light of public action. God calls us out of quiet servitude into the place of truth. God calls us out of despair into hope, out of indifference into love.

Public attention is often less comfortable than anonymity! Hope is more vulnerable than despair, and yes, love...love is surely more painful and costly than indifference! So this is not about what is easy or what feels good, or what is popular. It is about God's call—a divine appointment with you and me and history (and *her* story). And that call is real. Because God is real.

If we pay attention we will know the call. We will know the day for which we were made, and the moment for which we were set aside. "I will make you a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach Earth's farthest bounds."

Saint Teresa of Avila is reputed to have put it this way:

*Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours,
Yours are the eyes through which to look out Christ's compassion to the world;
Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good;
Yours are the hands with which he is to bless humans now.*