

Trinity United Methodist Church

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“Action Packed Summer – When God Chooses”

Pastor Dan Elmore

Scripture: Acts 13:1-3

Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

So last week we talked about how conversion to Christ happens in a variety of ways. We read about Saul’s Damascus Road experience, where he was blinded by the light, how that’s hailed as “the ultimate conversion experience,” and you’re not saved unless you have that kind of blinded by the light experience. And actually it’s not quite true.

Some have that blinded by the light, knocked on your rear-end by God experience in one way or another. Some others sort of have a more meandering journey of coming to faith, and some of us have been born and raised in the faith. My experience is a bit of a combination of the two, growing up in the faith with a little meandering here or there.

But I do have more dramatic chapters within my story of faith, and one of the most dramatic, probably, is my call to ministry. Sort of the “where I heard the voice of God” moment. But it begins in the context of my faith journey. I was baptized into the faith as an infant, and one of the reasons why we baptize all ages in the United Methodist Church is because as a sacrament, it’s all about what God is doing through that action, that through baptism God claims us as his children. God claims us as his children, and

so it doesn't matter if we're a newborn baby, or – my first baptism I did as a pastor was an 80-some year-old man a week before he died. That was a pretty cool experience.

But 80, or 8, or 8 months, it doesn't matter, because God in baptism claims us as his own. He speaks "yes" over us, some theologians have said, in a world that constantly tells us "no." No, you're nobody. No, you're not worth it. No, you're not loved, or whatever the case might be – God always speaks "yes." Yes, you are loved by Me. Yes, I am in favor of you. Yes, I am on your side.

And so my call to ministry begins in baptism. And then around age 12 I went through Confirmation in church, and that was one of the times that I said *my* "yes" back to God. That yes, I am choosing to follow You.

But then around age 17 I was at our District youth retreat in Blackstone, Virginia. The conference used to own a conference facility there. And it was funny when the conference talked about selling it because it had fallen into disrepair too much. People at Annual Conference were like, "You can't sell Blackstone. God lives there," because there's been so many great spiritual experiences there.

But anyway, we were there for our District youth retreat, and the District Superintendent was there that weekend. Now the District Superintendent is like the intermediary between me and y'all and the Bishop. And so the District Superintendent now is like my immediate boss, my immediate supervisor. And so it's sort of a big deal for the District Superintendent to be there. He had gotten to know me as I served as a youth on various district committees and so forth. But during that weekend he said to me, "I hope you'll be open to God's calling you to ordained ministry."

Now to back up a little bit, I'd gotten comments along those lines along the way before that. One of my favorite movies is *The Godfather*. So for Halloween I would wear my double-breasted pinstriped suit with my fedora and go through the lunch line at school, and the lunch ladies would say, "Oh, don't you look like such a preacher!" I said, "I'm trying to look like Michael Corleone, but thanks very much."

I was in debate class in school, I was in the debate club. I remember one competition, and this happened many times, where people would tell me, "You've got a great speaking voice." It was one competition, the judge found me after the day was over. He said, "Yeah, that was horrible, what you did in there. It was obvious you didn't prepare. But – your speaking voice is incredible. You really should do something with that." And comments like that along the way.

But that weekend was the first time that a pastor had said anything about maybe God was calling me to something more, into ordained ministry. And much less the District Superintendent saying this to me. So during the altar call that weekend on Saturday

night, I stayed in my seat. And when I stayed there in my seat, the altar call was going on, I chose not to go forward, but I looked up and – y’all have heard this story in bits and pieces before – I literally said, “What’s up?” You can pray like that. God’s cool like that. You don’t have to get all pious with your prayers, okay? “Oh, Holy Father, we beseech thee...” No. “What’s up?” What do you want me to do? And in a voice that was not my own, that wasn’t coming from anybody around me, I heard, “Go into ordained ministry.” It was almost like a whisper, but it was also audible. And it’s hard to describe, but it wasn’t just from me. And I heard “Go into ordained ministry,” and then I talked back. You can talk back to God, too, by the way. And I talked back. I said, “but what about music?” I’d played piano from an early age. I picked up trumpet in middle school. I was planning to be a high school band director. And I heard God say, “You can always use music. Go into ordained ministry.”

So Mom and Dad were there. I’m an only child, we’re very close. They were there for the weekend, helping out, so I found them after the service was over. I said, “We need to talk.” And I told them what had happened, and they said, “we’re glad you had that experience and finally figured it out for yourself. We’ve seen that coming.”

I went home and told my pastor at the home church and he said the same thing. “Yeah, I knew that. Glad you finally figured that out.” And the rest, as they say, is history. More meandering, more running from the call, and so forth, but here I am.

The thing of it is, that’s my call story, but we all actually have a call story. We all actually have a call to ministry. That call is rooted in our baptism. Because we live as sent people by the nature of our baptism. Jesus didn’t tell the disciples, “Go into all the world and make disciples and baptize and let them sit on their laurels and do nothing until I get back.” But it’s to send more people out into ministry. It’s when we say “yes” to God’s “yes” to us.

One of my pet peeves in ministry is when people introduce me. And it happened a lot of times at the wedding I did yesterday here at Trinity, as I’m getting introduced to various family members and they say, “This is *the minister*. This is *the minister*.” And it’s a cultural thing, I know. But it’s a pet peeve of mine because I’m not *the minister*. There are no *professional* ministers. We are all meant to be in ministry in one way, shape or form. We are *all* ministers. I might be *the pastor*, but we’re all ministers together.

But we do need leaders. We need pastors and teachers and so forth. And we see this in the Book of Acts in our lesson for today. The early church continued to grow and to spread. They have made it to Antioch and even beyond, but Antioch is well north of Jerusalem in Syria, kind of in the northeast corner of the Mediterranean Sea. But God is certainly not even done yet going that far, because the Gospel has to continue to spread. And God needed people to continue that mission. And so we read today that the

Holy Spirit said to that early church, “Set apart Barnabas and Saul for this work.” And the church sends them out.

Calling and sending. Calling and sending. Calling and sending is the pattern of God from the very beginning, all the way back to Abram and Sarai. Abraham and Sarah; they changed their names, too. And God comes to Abram and he says, “I’m going to make you the father of a great nation. Your people are going to be my people,” and etc. And then he says, “Now go. And by the way, you’re going to know where you’re going when I tell you you’re there.” How’s that for directions? Some GPS, huh? Thanks, God. That’s just like God. “Just go, and you’ll know where you’re going when I tell you that you’re there.” Total dependence on God.

We see this in Moses, the calling of Moses and that burning bush experience. God speaks to Moses, he calls him, he tells him what he wants him to do, and then he sends Moses back into Egypt, from where Moses had fled because he killed somebody, and to where he did not surely want to return.

As we might think about where God is calling us, we can learn a few things from today’s text. We read that *the Holy Spirit said*. Isn’t that great? Isn’t it great in the Bible when we read, literally in black and white, *the Holy Spirit said*. When God speaks to the prophets, the Lord says, “Thus saith the Lord.” And it’s there literally in black and white. Isn’t it nice to have that assurance that that’s the voice of God? It’s a little harder today, isn’t it? Sometimes it’s the voice of God. Sometimes it’s our breakfast maybe talking back to us, or something else.

I read this supposedly true story of a person that was working as part of a crew on an ambulance. And they pulled up at this intersection, and evidently the car in front of them was not moving out of the way. And so the driver got on the PA to say to the car, “Please move to the side.” The person was startled and moved over right away and the ambulance went on their way to the call. They returned back that same direction to go back to the station and they saw that this car was still sitting there and that somebody was inside. So they went over to the car, thinking maybe something had happened, something was wrong with that person. And they found in there an elderly woman. “Ma’am, are you okay?” “Yes, I’m fine.” “Well, you know where you’re going?” “Well, I know where I was going, but I heard the voice of God telling me to move over, and I haven’t heard God say to go again, so I’m going to wait here until I hear it.” They said, “Ma’am, that was not God. That was us. That was the driver. You hear my voice, I’m speaking to you now.” “No, it was God.” They couldn’t convince her. And so the driver said, “let’s just go.” They went down the road a little bit. They turned around and pulled up behind the woman again, got on the PA and said, “Ma’am, you can go now.” And she pulled off.

It can be a little hard to tell. Is it the voice of God or not? How can we know more for sure? We read that the Holy Spirit said these instructions to them in the context where they were worshiping the Lord and fasting. Worshiping and fasting are spiritual disciplines. The best way we can hear the voice of God is in making sure that we're practicing our spiritual disciplines, worshiping and fasting. Prayer. Reading the Scriptures. Because whatever we hear God telling us to do is never going to contradict His word in the Scriptures.

I shared at 8:30, I like using an analogy that is largely lost on younger audiences. These days we're used to just pushing a button. I mean, who even really listens to their radio anymore? Most of us listen to playlists, right? Spotify. I do it. But if you're in the car, we're used to just hitting the presets or hitting the "Scan" or the "Seek" button that takes us straight to the clear station.

But if you remember the days, I remember from my childhood – some of you are thinking "kid" – where you actually had a dial and you had to dial in that station. You had to get it just right where it was static-free or mostly static-free. And that's the way it is to hear God's voice as well. Oh, if it was only as easy as pushing a button and we're there. Instead, we've got to work on it a little bit. We've got to constantly kind of fine tune as we go through life.

So the Holy Spirit said, "set apart for me." What does it mean to be set apart? Some people consider that being set apart might mean going, then, and living a hermit life. That surely is not for me. Go live in some ivory tower somewhere or some desert hillside or something of the sort. But being set apart for a particular ministry actually is just being focused on that particular ministry. Set apart means being able to focus in and be ready for that avenue of ministry.

If you remember back when my friend Greg was here and he preached on Acts chapter 6. In Acts chapter 6 a dispute arose, a very practical matter, some widows were being overlooked in the distribution of food. Maybe some favoritism going on there or whatever the case was. And they came to the pastors, the apostles, the original 12, and they said, "You've got to do something about this." That happens a lot in church leadership, by the way. "*You've got to do something about this.*" And what did those apostles say? Do you remember? They said, "All right. That's a problem. So pray about it and choose some people who are equipped and called and full of the Holy Spirit to take care of this matter." And they said, "because we've got to focus on our set-apart ministry of the Word of God." They stayed focused on their set-apart ministry. They enabled and equipped others to focus on their set-apart ministry. And do you remember what happened? The church grew. It continued to prosper. It continued to spread when they were able to focus on their ministry.

Being set apart enables us to live in a ready state. Not in some hermit living, but living like Jesus – *in* the world, but not *of* the world.

But there is one problem when we talk about these call stories. Many of y'all are probably thinking, "Yeah, but I haven't heard God like you've heard God, Pastor Dan. And I don't think I ever will." Or "I don't have that burning bush experience. I don't necessarily have that 'call story'." Well, J.D. Walt, who writes the Daily Text from Seedbed, says "we tend to think of the binary categories of being called to ministry or 'just' a layperson." I've heard so many times, meeting people at church events, and "what church are you from?", etc. "Oh, are you the pastor there?" "No, I'm 'just' a lay person." As if it's some second-hand category to the clergy. And nothing could be further from the truth. J.D. says "nothing quashes the Holy Spirit like this kind of self-disqualification from the game. How about we banish the language of 'call to ministry,' as though it were a category for a certain group of people? What if instead we thought more along the lines of being one who has sinned, who lives their daily life on call?" On call.

If you're familiar with professions that you have to be on call, you can sort of live your life as you plan, but if that call comes in you've got to shift. You've got to go and respond to the call. You live in a state of readiness so that you can respond whenever and to whatever that call might be. You might have your agenda set for the day. If you're on call on a Saturday, you might plan to get some stuff done around the house, but that call comes in and plans shift and you go respond, and you might be able to go back to that original plan, but you might have to shelve that plan for another day.

What if we lived "on call" to the Holy Spirit? We've got our plan for life. We've got how we think things should go. But maybe we get a call to do something else and we shift. And maybe we might be able to go back to the original plan. Maybe we're off on a completely different fork of the river, whatever the case might be. But imagine if we were to live life as those who were sent out into the world to be on call for the Holy Spirit.

That's part of the call story narrative. How are you called? Remember, there are no professional ministers. Maybe your ministry is caring for your children and making sure that they become successful adults and learn about God. Maybe your ministry is to care for an ailing family member at this time. Maybe your ministry is to teach in the schools, the school here at church, the public schools, Isle of Wight Academy, whatever the case might be. Maybe your call is to encourage others, like Barnabas – name means "son of encouragement."

There's all kinds of avenues of ministry. When Bekah and I first met, she was exploring her own call to ministry, thinking maybe God was calling her to be a pastor. And then

she figured out, she honestly admitted, that God was calling her to marry a pastor. To be a clergy spouse. And when she told me that a month into dating, I said, “all right. Pick a date.” I proposed officially later.

But there’s all kinds of avenues of ministry. You don’t have to be in ordained ministry to be a minister, because there are no professional ministers. So let us live our lives on call for the Holy Spirit.

Thanks be to God.