

December 12, 2010

Helping You Answer God's Call

a sermon on Luke 1.26-38

by David C. Mauldin

Westminster Presbyterian Church, Mobile, Alabama

How would you know if God called you? Assuming he didn't send the angel Gabriel, which would be nice, wouldn't it? An angel shows up, scares you half to death, but then calms you down and tells you exactly what God wants you to do. It would prevent a lot of doubt and confusion on our part if God did that for each of us. Part of the point of our scripture reading, though, is that the angel's message for Mary was special, because Jesus is unique. Sending angels is not God's normal way of doing business. If you sit around waiting for a sign that clear, all you'll ever do is sit around.

What about us, though? Mary had a unique role in God's plan that none of us has, but surely we have a role too. Have you ever wondered about the point of it all? Asked yourself, "What am I here for?" We humans have an inner drive to find meaning and purpose. When we talk about our lives—or our families—we tell stories. Stories have plot. They move toward resolution. That's what we look for in the messiness of life: a goal, a purpose, resolution, a story that makes sense and holds everything together. We're not just here. We are here for some *reason*, and intuitively we know this.

Might that intuition be a clue? Did God create us with a thirst for meaning so that we would listen for his call? I believe he did. God has a plan and a purpose for your life. How do you know what it is, though? How does he call you? And how do you hear when he does?

I have known a lot of pastors and seminary students who sincerely believed God called them to be pastors. I am one myself. I have only met one who claimed to hear an audible voice from God. It was a guy I went to school with. He said God spoke to him during a worship service, while he was watching someone else get baptized. No one else heard anything, but he heard it clearly and knew it was God. He's a rare exception. Most of us discern God's call over time. God works through circumstances and other people and in all sorts of ways. If you pray and earnestly seek his will, somehow he stirs your heart and at some point you just know. I believe God called me to be the pastor of this church, and part of the reason I believe this is that two years before I had ever heard of Westminster, my wife and I were on our honeymoon and met a couple from Mobile. They are not part of Westminster. Several months before I began looking for a church, we visited them and saw the gulf coast for the first time. Later the opportunity to come to Westminster opened, and we felt God had been laying the groundwork for some time. Some might call it coincidence. I see something more.

Often you need patience to hear God's call. He calls in his own ways and in his own time. He can take you by surprise. Look at poor Mary. You know she never saw *that* coming. Even when you are surprised, though, you can often look back and see how the pieces fit. They were there all along, you just never knew they could go together in quite this way.

I suspect God has a special calling for most people, something you are supposed to do. It may have something to do with your career. You might be called to be a school teacher or an accountant or a waiter or an artist. Your call might be something else. You could be called to be an elder in your church. Or it might not be about the church. You might be called to serve in some other way.

Whatever your special calling is, and however God reveals it to you, you have another, more basic calling. This one doesn't take much discernment. This is a call God gives to everyone. It is a call to come home. To know God and to love him. This call is what the Bible is about. It is what Christianity is about. It's what the church is about. The church exists, in part at least, to help you hear and answer God's call. God calls every person to three things: faith in Jesus Christ, holy living, and some kind of ministry. You can be absolutely certain that, whatever else God has in store for you, he wants this. He wants you to have faith in Christ, to live a holy life, and to serve others in his name. That's your call, and I want to explore each part of it briefly this morning. I hope that you will hear God's call, and if you do, answer it the way Mary answered the angel.

First comes the most basic and important call of all, the call to faith in Jesus Christ. Our scripture reading shows why this is important. Gabriel tells Mary that she will bear a son, but not just any son. He will be the Son of the Most High God. He will be the Savior. He will be the promised Messiah. That's what this business about "the throne of his ancestor David" means. Jesus would be the one to establish the kingdom of God and to bring, in God's time, peace, justice, and righteousness. And his kingdom will have no end. That was the angel's message, and it has become the message of the church and the conviction of all believers. If this message is not true, then you will find no truth in the Christian faith. Who knows whether you will ever find any truth at all, but the one place you won't find it is here. For we stake everything on our trust in Jesus – that he is who he says he is and he will do what he said he will do.

Some people think faith means believing without evidence or in spite of the evidence, but that's not what Christians mean by *faith*. Faith includes belief, though not without evidence and reasons. Christian faith includes believing Jesus and what he told us about God. But it is also much more than this. The core of Christianity is that God the Father raised Jesus from the dead. Because he rose, he lives, and because he lives, you can know him. He can be present and powerful in your life today. Faith, then, at the deepest level means you know and you trust the Living Savior.

Second is the call to holy living. I need to find a new way to say that. It scares people. They think of crazy old guys with long beards wearing camel hair and living in the desert. Or worse, they think of tightly-wound hypocrites who carry a Bible everywhere, listen to TV preachers with big hair, and think they are holier than everyone else – they think they are holy when in fact they are not.

This, of course, is not what I mean at all. What I mean is that God made you for relationships. You need love and you need to love others. Your most important relationship is with God. You will never find lasting peace and fulfillment apart from him. You were made to run on God the way a car was made to run on gasoline – or the way your body was made for food. If you don't have food, you can eat cardboard, but not for long. You were made for a relationship with God and with other people. Sin can be defined in many ways. The way I like most is this: Sin is whatever disrupts and destroys your relationships. Love is how you treat people. When you treat them in good and helpful ways, that's love. The opposite of love is sin.

Once we get these definitions straight, it's easy to see what holy living means. Holy living means you love God and other people. You honor God in your actions, and you honor his image in your fellow human beings. These are the two greatest commandments, according to Jesus: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself. All the other commandments grow out of these. Of course, those other commandments are important, because we are awfully good at rationalizing our sin and convincing ourselves we are acting with pure motives when we are not. We need some good clear rules, such as "Thou shalt not steal," to help us love our neighbor.

I hope you see also how holiness has nothing to do with hypocrisy. Holiness depends on the kind of humility that admits we live by God's grace. God sent us a Savior because we needed one, and we needed one because we are not holy. We are not very good at loving our neighbor, and we stink at loving God. The truth is – and this is the whole Christian faith in a nutshell: Every human being is so broken that our only hope is the grace of God; and God's grace comes to us through Jesus. He died in our place, so that we might be forgiven and reconciled to God. When you give yourself to him, he begins a restoration project to make you beautiful. It takes a long time. For two reasons, you are really broken (more than you probably realize – we all are), and the end result he has in mind is shockingly audacious. He wants to make you a new creation. C.S. Lewis wrote to the effect that if you take the meanest, pettiest, stupidest Christian you could find – and this may take some work because many of us excel in these categories – and you could see this same person on the other side of death, when God's work is complete in him or her, you would encounter a being so beautiful and pure your first impulse would be to fall down and worship. I describe it this way: When God is finished with you, you will be able to love perfectly, just as his love for you is perfect.

Holiness does not mean pretending you are good when you are not. It means humbly accepting God's grace. He gives you a new status. You are forgiven and adopted as his own dear child. And you are given a new destiny – to become like Christ. Holiness simply means you do your best to act like someone who has been forgiven and has a Father in heaven.

Third and last, God calls you to ministry. This past summer I ran into an old friend who sells construction equipment. I asked him about his business, because the past couple of years, the construction industry has fallen on hard times, and I expect not many companies are investing in equipment. In the course of our discussion, he made the remark, "Your job is more important than mine." I think he meant that telling people about Jesus is more important than selling construction equipment. If so, I agree with him, although on another level I think he is wrong. He is wrong because he is a Christian, so we are both in the same business, telling people about Jesus. I do that very directly through sermons and writing. He does so less directly, but possibly more effectively. If people who deal with him know he is a Christian, then his character and integrity will do more to help them hear God's call than my preaching, which many of them will never hear anyway. He has the chance to show them the gospel in action every day. You do too.

When I say God calls you to ministry, I mean he expects you to find ways to serve others in his name. Your own personal gifts and personality determine the shape of your ministry. Some minister through their job. Some volunteer at church. Some have a knack for caring for the elderly. Some for working with children. Some are introverts who help behind the scenes.

Ministry is also about love. When you minister, God loves others through you. At the same time – and I speak from experience – you learn to love others, broken though they are.

God calls you to faith in Jesus Christ, holy living, and ministry. Believe it! You don't need an angel to tell you this. Even I can say it, because when I say it I am merely repeating what God has said. The Bible, the church, the whole Christian faith back me up. I pray you hear God's call. If you do, your answer is easy. Just do what Mary did. So many people in the Bible argued with God and tried to weasel out of their call. Not Mary. "Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word." She was the first to hear the good news about Jesus, and she welcomed it with faith. God called her, and she answered with obedience. That's the way to answer God's call. May you hear, and may you answer as she did. Amen.