

Jesus' Call and Preparation

The Fifth Sunday in Lent—March 21, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

Hebrews 5:4-10

And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"; as he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek." In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Throughout my life I have been occasionally asked about my calling to be a pastor. "How were you called and how did you become a pastor?" I am sorry to say that the question usually has caught me off guard and my answers have not made good advantage of these opportunities. Much of the problem is that I, like most pastors, do not like to draw attention to my being ordained for fear that it enforce the popular notion that pastors are "really called Christians" while the rest of us are just ho-hum believers with no particular call from God. It has taken me too long to embrace the wonderful truth that we are *all* called by God to special service. I have learned to think in terms of our all being called, prepared and ordained by God for particular ministries. Today's epistle lesson tells us that not only were each of us called and prepared for special service, but so was Jesus our Lord! It's hard for most of us to imagine Jesus as being called and ordained, for he was divine and seemed to be so very ready from the start, but the Bible tells us of Jesus being called, trained and prepared. If we want a better understanding of people's calling and appointment to service, we would do well to start with Jesus our Lord.

The writer of Hebrews is explaining how Jesus became our great high priest who would reconcile us to God and he begins by explaining that *all* priests are called by God. *And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.* When the writer speaks of Aaron or the Aaronic priesthood, he is

referring to the Hebrew priesthood which began with Moses and the giving of the Law. Aaron, Moses' brother and occasional spokesman, was chosen by God to be the chief priest, and those of his family were to continue that work. This was a calling from God and not an answer to a request from Aaron. He was called, and so it is for any true priest. Just as Aaron was called, so was Jesus. *So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you'.* Jesus became our high priest by the call of God the Father, just as any servant of God finds their place of Kingdom service. It is easy for us to think of Jesus as "Mr. Automatic" who was in no need of any special calling or directing, but such thinking is misguided. His walk on this earth and his seeking after God's will for his life was much more like yours and mine than we commonly realize.

Jesus' call came and was affirmed a number of times. A call from God often comes through multiple experiences. The words we just heard from Hebrews were spoken from heaven at Jesus' baptism. We hear a similar affirmation from heaven at the Transfiguration. We also look at Jesus' calling as a fulfillment of prophecies, most notably from Psalms 2 and 110. Along with these affirmations from God we see Jesus doing all he could to walk in obedience. He was raised as an observant Jew, meditated upon the scriptures, and prayed much. He apparently sensed God calling him to go and be baptized by John, and having obeyed God's call he received the heavenly affirmation. This is a good example of how all Christians should discern their call from God. Do God's will as best as you know, listen for any special whispers toward certain service, and then be blessed by the affirmations you may experience. Often these are the words of affirmation spoken by another believer, and sometimes it is God's power and presence felt in our walk of obedience.

A word is in order regarding Melchizedek, the priest whom the writer mentions a number of times. Melchizedek was a mysterious character who is mentioned briefly yet prominently in Genesis (14:18-24). Abraham was returning from war with invading kings who had taken his nephew Lot and his family hostage, and by God's grace he was able to rescue them all. Suddenly we read of Abraham being greeted by Melchizedek, the king of Salem, who brought him wine and bread. Scholars agreed that Salem is Jerusalem, and this mysterious king was said to be a priest of God Most High. Melchizedek blessed Abraham, and in return received from Abraham a tithe of the spoils of war. Abraham apparently recognized Melchizedek as a very holy man and some have conjectured that he was a pre-incarnational appearance of Christ. One can only speculate. When the writer of Hebrews wanted to speak of a priest of the highest order, he spoke of Melchizedek.

So how is your calling coming along? Some may be quick to respond that they have heard no voices from heaven, but we cannot put off God so easily as that! Finding God's call on your life is not so difficult as we make it out to be. We know that it is

God's will for all of us to walk in humble obedience, worship and service to one another. What particular opportunities for service do you find appearing in your path? Are there any kinds of ministry which give you joy, or to which you are attracted? Are there any opportunities presenting themselves? Just recently we heard of the ministry of the *House of His Creation* across the street from St. Luke's. This should set all of us to thinking, "How can I be of help to this wonderful ministry?" One specific request that was mentioned was an experienced knitter who could teach the young ladies knitting as this is an often-requested training. One doesn't think of knitting as a Christian service, but God uses all kinds of people and methods to spread His love! We have all kinds of skills and experiences which we can use in Christ's service.

Consider how God might be calling you, and do not use the "humble excuse." Many are so busy telling themselves and all around them that they are not worthy of any significant work or office in the Kingdom, thinking, or at least pretending that they are being humble. Years ago, I used to hear many preachers tell how God had called them to be pastors but for years they "resisted the call," and this was said with some element of pride, as if they were showing godly character by resisting and thinking themselves unworthy. Doubtless, prideful ambition is a sin, but there is a crying need for more godly ambition in the Church! I love Paul's words to Timothy regarding those aspiring to Church leadership: *If anyone sets his heart on being a bishop, he desires a noble task.* (1 Timothy 3:1) Let us strive to do God's will and follow that call wherever it may lead us.

The call, however, may only be the beginning. After the call there usually comes a time of preparation. This was Jesus' experience, and this preparation was often painful. As our lesson makes clear: *In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.* Immediately following the heavenly affirmation at baptism Jesus was sent into the wilderness for forty days and nights of fasting and temptation! All through the three years of Jesus' earthly ministry he knew opposition and threats, and the life of an itinerant rabbi was not an easy one. When we see such troubles, we are quick to call them barriers to be overcome. Hebrews wants us to see them instead as avenues of preparation. These apparent roadblocks are actually exercises by which we are trained and shaped for ministry. This was how Jesus learned obedience, and this is how we too are to learn and be prepared. Life is hard, and God has a purpose in that difficulty.

These times of challenge and suffering are not intended to be endless. They have a purpose and a conclusion. We are told of our Lord, *and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.* Many have taken offense at the mention of Jesus being *made perfect*, as this presumes a previous imperfection.

The Bible is not referring to Jesus' moral perfection and holiness. He was always the perfect Son of God, but he was not yet perfected for his ultimate mission until he had walked the full length of the road to Calvary. A woodworker may find a perfect piece of walnut wood and take it to the shop. Though the wood is perfect, it still requires shaping and sanding to fulfill its ultimate purpose. Jesus was always the perfect Son of God, but only as he suffered and persisted was he completely shaped, readied and suited for his ultimate mission. First, Jesus had to become fully one of us, not simply through birth, but by experiencing the full human condition.

This message is being addressed to some very experienced people! You folks have been through life's mill and have the scars to show for it! Like a good piece of wood which must first be seasoned before it can be used, we are much more ready for service as we age. It is the experiences which we accumulate which truly make us able and ready for service. A wise person once observed that we should not call our older population "senior citizens," but "seasoned citizens." When work is to be done in the Church it is common to hear people speak of the younger people doing whatever task is at hand. Younger folks may have more energy, but it is the experienced who can attack a problem or task with much more wisdom. Life's training has great benefits!

Life's hard experiences are often preparation for service. I have mentioned that the hardest year of my life was my first year of seminary. I was enthused about becoming a pastor, yet that year brought me depression and many discouragements. Why would God allow this? As this difficult year drew to a close and many of these hurts were being resolved I came to an important realization. I had become very discouraged and was painfully reminded what a discouraging place this world is. That is good preparation for ministry, for it was impressed upon me that there is a world of discouraged people out there, and a big part of my calling is to bring them encouragement, as I had been encouraged. Think for a moment of a great and loving Christian that you know. Their life seems to radiate love and caring, and their presence is always a blessing to you. Now think for a moment of that person's background and experience. These are often the same people who have been through significant trouble and heartbreak. God uses such troubles and pains to make some amazing saints!

Jesus came. Jesus suffered greatly and knew the full depth and breadth of the human experience. Jesus became fully one of us so that he could die in our place on the Cross. Jesus took the sins of the world and all its punishment upon himself so that we could go free. Whatever fear, doubt or hurt you bring with you today, Jesus is fully familiar with it. Do you feel betrayed by ones you thought loved you? Jesus knew that all too well. Are you struggling with pain? Jesus was no stranger to such hurt. *And having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.* This was Jesus' great calling. His death was his moment of glory and the source of our complete salvation.

By Jesus' death and resurrection blessing came to the whole world. When people are called to a special ministry, blessings then flow freely. God does not want us to seek our calling and work so that we can then labor endlessly and pointlessly in his sweatshop. God calls and prepares us to be a blessing, and goodness knows that the world needs more blessings! What are your skills, interests, joys, disappointments and troubles preparing you for? This past week we observed St. Patrick's Day. Patrick was the very picture of calling, suffering and tremendous blessing. We think of Patrick as the great Church leader, and he was, but before he had high authority, he knew the lowest kind of suffering. While just a youth he was kidnapped and enslaved by the Irish. His escape was difficult, but in those young years God spoke to Patrick and guided him to faith, and later service in Ireland. When he ministered to the people of that nation, most of them poor and suffering heavy burdens, he did so with a genuinely caring heart. When he reached out to unbelievers, he did so remembering well the darkness of his former unbelief. Patrick suffered greatly throughout his life, and it was all training for God's service, and because of Patrick's obedience the Church in Ireland became strong and bright in a dark, difficult era.

With a misguided sense of humility, we often play down the matter of our divine calling and ordination to special service, and in doing so we get it all wrong. Let us more freely speak of God's call and guidance in our lives, and even the troubles which had made us who we are. Let us challenge others to seek their callings, and if they seem unable to find that calling, let us help them on their way. God has called each and every one of us so that we might be a blessing to the world around us, and we all know that the world could use a lot more blessing!