

## **GOD CALLING**

Sermon Presented to St. Paul's Church

6 Easter, John 15:9-17, Year B

May 10, 2015

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I saw the movie *Angels and Demons* some years ago. Based on Dan Brown's book by the same name, it is part of the *Da Vinci Code* series. Though actually written before the *Da Vinci Code*, it still featured the lead character Robert Langdon, the world's best symbologist, in a mystery that takes place when the Roman Catholic Church is in the process of calling a new Pope.

If you read the *Da Vinci Code*, you know that Langdon is a professed religious skeptic. In fact, in the movie his character is asked by the late Pope's personal assistant, Father Patrick McKenna, if he believed in God. Langdon replied, "Faith is a gift, one I have never received." Brown makes it a point to highlight Langdon's lack of faith and casts the Church, especially the Roman Catholic Church, in a negative light.

Nevertheless, his works are fiction. In fact, Tom Hanks who plays Langdon in the movie, was on Larry King Live not long after the movie was released. In speaking about the movie, Hanks said, "The movie is fiction played by fictional people."

Despite Langdon's antipathy toward the Church and matters of faith, he actually succeeds in cracking a conspiracy engineered by the Pope's radical assistant to wrest control of the papacy in order to establish a more right wing and ultraorthodox brand of Catholicism. In gratitude for Langdon's efforts, the chief cardinal in charge of the process of calling the new Pope says to Langdon, "I'm glad God sent us someone to save

the Church.” Langdon, obviously taken aback that the cardinal meant him said, “Are you saying God sent me?” The cardinal replied, “Why of course He sent you.”

The irony in that statement isn’t lost on the listener. God sent a skeptic, presumably an unbeliever, to save the Church from a conspiracy that could totally destroy the Church. Interestingly, such a concept shouldn’t surprise us because our faith heritage has been saved and spread by the most unlikely of characters.

All we have to do is look at the matriarchs, patriarchs, and saints of the church to see that God usually called the most unlikely, least qualified, and sometimes, nefarious folks to be His prophets and to advance His Kingdom. The Old Testament is rife with these kinds of characters. Those of you who know the Bible and its stories of these so called “pillars,” may be less than pleased to call Samson, David, Abraham or Sarah as your great grandparents in the faith. Samson was a thug, wastrel and murderer yet was called by God to be His instrument of justice. David, the apple of God’s eye, was not much better and was himself an adulterer, murderer, and a man who couldn’t be always trusted. Abraham, the father of the three major monotheistic religions---Judaism, Christianity, and Islam---willingly gave his wife Sarah to the Pharaoh of Egypt to be his consort so as to protect himself from death. He also had her say to the Pharaoh that Abraham was her brother in order to further the ruse. (Genesis 12:11-16). And Sarah, the mother of a whole nation, was a conniving schemer who had her husband conceive a son through her slave Hagar. (Genesis 16, et seq). Knowing their stories as the Bible tells them, you may question their qualifications for sainthood and recognition.

The heroes of the New Testament aren't much better. In fact, they tended to have been more spiritually and intellectually challenged than shining examples of the best and brightest of God's creation. The disciple Matthew was a tax collector, Peter was a clueless roughneck, and Judas Iscariot was a member of the zealot party, which by today's standards, would have been called the Al Qaeda/ISIS of their day. Then, of course, there is Paul, formerly Saul, who engineered reprisals and persecutions of the early Christians before his conversion on the road to Damascus.

Yet, on any given Sunday we are reminded of our indebtedness to these folks. We are called to thankfully remember them because we believe in the same God today only because these very same folks lived the faith before us and left us a legacy that's worthy of our imitation. Though they slogged through life in their own feet of clay, they managed to be faithful when it counted.

The interesting thing about all of these characters is that they share something in common: none of them were self-made believers. They didn't unilaterally decide to follow God. They only did after God called them first.

Jesus says this in today's reading from John. The setting is the last supper and Jesus is trying again to prepare his disciples for his death, resurrection, and their subsequent mission. Jesus says to them, "You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last." (John 15:16). What he was trying to convey to his disciples on that final night was a reminder that even though things were about to unravel, they were embraced by a divine purpose larger than their individual power of choice.

This message remains unchanged even today. We are also called to be a part of a divine plan. These words from John's Gospel call us back to an awareness of God's initiative in seeking us out, gathering us into community, and sending us into the world. It was always God's idea before it was ours, so we are also part of God's divine plan for His Kingdom. Even the most unlikely, least qualified, and undeserving of us is invited by our God in Christ to be a part of God's initiative. He came to us, not the other way around.

I'm reminded of my rather lengthy and convoluted call to the ordained ministry. Throughout the process I had no great epiphany—no burning bush—nothing tangible in my mind that suggested God was calling me to switch professions. Even when I appeared before the Commission on Ministry, which is our Diocesan discernment committee for those seeking ordination, I remember the Commission chair The Rev. Marshall Craver asking, "Tell us why you are here." My response was honest and probably a surprise to those assembled when I said, "I was hoping you could tell me. A lot of other people seem to think I'm called to be a priest and I need your help in discerning if this is really a call from God." The rest, as they say, is history. But my call wasn't initiated by me, it was from beyond me and I believe that it originated from God. In fact, when the discernment process started, I didn't think I was qualified to be a priest. Yet God obviously had other ideas.

So it is for all of us. While He may not be calling all of us to the ordained ministry, God has called each of us by name to do His work in the Kingdom. Yes, He calls the unlikely, least qualified, and sometimes the most scurrilous folks to help build

His Kingdom. I would say that would apply to most of those He calls. Yet He calls us nevertheless. Our job is simply to say “yes” and then get busy with whatever God has on His mind for us.

Frankly, I kind of like this process. It takes the heavy decision away from me and leaves that up to God. All He requires from me is a simple assent to His plan.

The following is a story by the great preacher and teacher of homiletics, Fred Craddock, which illustrates what I mean. According to Craddock, a family is out for a drive one Sunday afternoon. It’s a pleasant afternoon, and they relax at a leisurely pace down the highway. Suddenly, the two children in the back seat begin tapping their father on the back and say: “Daddy, Daddy, stop the car! There’s a kitten back there on the side of the road!”

The father says, “So, there’s a kitten on the side of the road. We’re having a drive.”

“But Daddy you must stop and pick it up.”

“I don’t have to stop and pick it up.”

“But Daddy, if you don’t, it will die.”

“Well then, it will have to die. We don’t have room for another animal. We already have a zoo at the house. No more animals!”

“But Daddy, are you just going to let it die?”

“Be quiet, children, we’re trying to have a pleasant day.”

The children said, “We never thought our Daddy would be so mean and cruel as to let the kitten die.”

Finally, the mother turns to her husband and says, “Dear, you’ll have to stop.” He sighs, turns the car around, returns to the spot, and pulls off to the side of the road. He goes out to pick up the little kitten, which is just skin and bones, sore-eyed, and full of fleas. When he reaches down to pick it up, with its last bit of energy the kitten bristles, baring tooth and claws and proceeds to grab the father’s hand with his claws and sink his teeth into his hand. The father stifles a shout and is able to pry the kitten free by grabbing it by the loose skin at the neck. He takes it over to the car and says, “Don’t touch it, it probably has leprosy.”

Back home they go. When they get to the house, the children give the kitten several baths, about a gallon of milk, and intercede: “Can we let it stay in the house just for tonight? Tomorrow we will fix a place for it in the garage.”

The father, still nursing the stinging wounds to his hand, says sarcastically, “Sure, take our bedroom---in fact, let it sleep in my bed.” The children fix a comfortable bed for it in a box in the corner of their room. Several weeks pass, and all the while the father avoids the cat like the plague. Then one day the father walks into the house and is surprised to feel something rubbing against his leg. Seeing it was the kitten, he reaches down toward the cat, carefully checking to see that no one is watching. When the cat sees his hand, it does not bare his claws and hiss; instead it arches his back receive a caress. “Is this the same cat?” thought the father. “It couldn’t be the same cat,” he reasoned. But it was. Something had happened in this rather tenuous relationship---the cat had claimed the father.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, (Chalice Press, 2002), pp. 24-25.

Today's reading reminds us that our God in Christ chose us. That's the story of Scripture. It's the story of God's continued commitment to call us to become the people He wants us to be. He reached out to Samson, David, Abraham and Sarah, and through His Son, reached out to the disciples. When God did so, He declared them to be His followers before they reached out to Him.

Our faith in God rests upon the choices of God, rather than upon our efforts. This is a comforting thought because all it requires of us is to say "yes," and God will do the rest, in and through us. AMEN