

Matthew 9:2-7  
Luke 7:40-47  
Colossians 3:12-13

## AS GOD HAS DONE UNTO US

You are all on notice to be alert and watching for a specific mission that God may wish to assign to this congregation. That feels like both an exciting task and a difficult one, according to many of the comments I have received. It's not that you are unwilling; it's just that you wonder, "How in the world will we ever recognize such a call when it comes? We don't even know what to look for." At least that is the most frequent reaction I have heard.

Apparently some of you have been reminded and have renewed your efforts to discover your own VOCATIO. That is pleasant for me to hear, for indeed the two are the same subject. As Christians, we each seek the call (vocatio) of God for our own individual destiny – what we are supposed to accomplish. Likewise we seek the vocatio of God for ourselves as a congregation. It is the same principle and promise. Indeed the Scriptures reveal that God has purpose for individuals, for groups, for whole communities – and yes, even for nations. God's call on any of these levels is not always heard or heeded, but it is nevertheless there for those who wish to hear it and heed it. That is one of the great affirmations of our faith. Therefore, and of course, it is also humbling and a bit unnerving to realize that God has such specific plans and hopes and expectations for us.

I believe it is a dependable principle of Life that those who discover their vocatio are productive, filled with vitality – they live within the deeper meanings of the word "happy." And this seems to hold true regardless of how much opposition or trial may be present for them on the surface of Life. Concurrently, those who have no sense of vocatio struggle with feelings of boredom, waste, uselessness, depression. Naturally then, discovering our purpose is terribly crucial. It is always at the center of our more important spiritual awakenings, and is in fact the central experience of CONVERSION.

But all of this, which we usually think of and apply to individual life, is also true of family life – and of the life of a congregation. The same principles are at work in a group, a class, a business (or department within a corporation), and so on up to the life of a nation. (For example: In the '60s our nation's vocatio was challenged, and we admitted we

had lost the sense of vocatio. In the '70s we each did our own thing, trying to pretend we did not need a vocatio. In the '80s we were seeking our vocatio again, realizing we could not proceed or endure without one.)

In any case, now that so many of us are thinking about and seeking our purpose both individually and together, I would like to remind you that the search is not as nebulous as it may seem at first. It does depend upon the Holy Spirit, to be sure. And the Spirit times things for when we are ready to receive them. Nevertheless, we do have some strong hints about the process that enable us to cooperate with the Spirit if we are willing. So I ask you to follow me once again through some of the terrain.

Let me begin with the phrase “to and through.” I want to remind you that God’s calling comes *to us and through us*. Without in any way minimizing the excitement and wonder of God’s presence and revelation to us, let it be said and remembered that we are never the final destination or purpose or resting place of either God’s Word *or* God’s calling. The call – the vocatio – is always deeper than we imagine. We are only and always a small part of its vastness. For a time we feel singled out, called apart, specially dealt with, specially blessed. It is all true, of course. And the humble awareness of such special attention from the Creator is enough to keep us fully occupied for a long time.

Except God’s call always comes “to and through.” Real love is always a fruit-bearer – always producing some kind of children. God always seems to want some kind of return on every investment. So the calling of the Lord is *to us* and – if it really is the Lord behind it – is also *through us to others*. We can trust that to be one of the marks of vocatio.

It is fascinating to watch it happen over and over. What God does *to* Moses, for instance, God does *through* Moses for the whole people. It does not seem possible at first; it does not seem like even God can pull it off. But it hangs there as certain as the Northern Star: deliverance, guidance, protection, revelation, commission. As Moses stays faithful, what happens *to* Moses also happens *through* Moses for the whole people.

Moses’ name means “delivered,” or “deliverer.” The two meanings shade back and forth into each other all of his life. He is delivered as a tiny baby from the death that Pharaoh had decreed for all male babies

of the Israelites. He grows up in the safety of Pharaoh's household, yet he learns the faith and traditions of his own people. As a young man, he tries to take justice into his own hands (as young people tend to do) and free his people by his own power. It is a pathetic and useless attempt, of course, but he is again delivered and escapes into the wilderness – now a fugitive and a murderer.

As young folk often do next, he then wanders far from his people and his faith – until he is delivered once again, this time by an encounter with a burning bush. And this time Moses is delivered back into the presence and commission of God: He is converted. He discovers himself cared about, sought, valued, sent, trusted. He is sent back to free his people from oppression – the very thing he had tried to do on his own power before. Only now he goes with God's power.

This is one of the most startling events in world history. Yet what does Moses actually do? He does for the people what God has done for him. He takes the people out of Egypt to the wilderness where he himself had found refuge. He takes them to the mountain of God where he had first received his commission. There, on Mount Sinai, the whole people receive *their* commission. What God does *to* Moses, God does *through* Moses for the whole people. What else *can* he do? He cannot lead where he has not been.

It stares at us through all the recorded history of God's dealings with people: Abraham, David, the prophets, Jesus, Paul, the early church fathers, the reformers. The "called" of God shape the life of the people according to the way God deals with them as individuals. The call comes "to and through." It is one of the basic ways God works, and with the "called" it is the way God *always* works.

The second verse is the same as the first. If you are the called of God, you are called to call others into whatever God is doing with you. Isn't that verse the same as the first? It just gets it down a little closer. And frankly, I have as much struggle with this one as I have with the first verse.

Moses called people into deliverance and into submission to Torah. He had no choice. He might have liked Joseph's role better; it was certainly more successful and more comfortable in the end. But that was not relevant. Moses was not asked if he would like to be

Joseph. We are not asked if we would like to be somebody else, either! What God was doing with Moses was the only thing Moses had to offer. Is that not a strong hint about where we must be looking if we are looking for our vocatio – as individuals *or* as a church? We must first recognize and trust what God is doing with us in our own lives.

Jesus called people into death and resurrection. That is what God was doing with Him. Therefore everything Jesus touched was changed, transformed. The principle of death and resurrection is shot through every page of His story: water to wine; five loaves to five thousand; Law to Gospel; blind to see; lame to walk; crazy to sane; stingy to generous; Levi to Matthew; Simon to Peter. On this level, I think even Jesus had no other options, other than to have no ministry at all – that is, to quit, to stop. Jesus was doing for others what God was doing with Him. And once done, it began to break loose for the whole world.

How much sad, futile time I have wasted trying to be what people needed or wanted (or thought they wanted), when really there was no choice (except in my imagination). Trying to be a good minister is the death of ministry. What God is doing in my life is all I have to offer, however small that may seem to me or to others, and however much I might wish it were otherwise. I believe the same is true for each one of you. And it is true of us as a congregation.

There is no way to cheat on it. I cannot call others into where I wish God would lead me, or where God has called somebody else and it is going very well for them, or where the books or the professors say I ought to be going. If you have a ministry, a calling, a vocatio, it all springs from and depends upon what God is doing in your life – with you.

After that, I doubt if the role or style really matters, as long as it is authentic to who we are. Hosea was really different from David. Their roles and styles were “night and day” different too. That did not matter. God reached many people through both of them. The only sure thing is that authentic ministry will not fit any preset mold; it will not match any prefabricated job description; it will not please everybody, or sometimes maybe even anybody. But that’s okay. Jesus said, “*Woe to you when all men speak well of you.*” I love that teaching. Of all the things Jesus ever said, that’s the only one I can think of that I have never had to worry about.

## AS GOD HAS DONE UNTO US

---

If we are looking for vocatio – our own purpose and mission – we can remember the principles: God will be doing through us, for others, what God has done for us. We will be calling other people to come experience that which God is doing in our own lives. This narrows the field considerably. This gives us some framework and some borders. Now we know something of where to look and what to look for.

Trying to put it together, then – not with some oppressive precision, but just for clues: We are likely to be able to do for others what has been done for us. We are likely to be able to heal where we ourselves have been wounded and have experienced healing. We are likely to be of service in areas that have long drawn and fascinated us with more than normal interest. But there are also things we cannot do very well. Have you ever watched nonalcoholics trying to help alcoholics? It's pathetic. They mean well; they know some things, sort of. But it just doesn't come off.

Sometimes we get stuck thinking in ruts because they are so familiar. For instance, we think, "We should help the poor." But most of us do not know anything about being poor. It is highly unlikely, therefore, that we would be any good at helping the poor or that God would call us to do that primarily. Of course, there are many kinds of poverty. And there are endless ways and areas that people need help. I have not met anybody in this parish who has never been wounded. And the healing capacities here are tremendous; in fact, we are beginning to be a place where people find healing. So maybe now we can discover some common denominators as a congregation – places or areas where we have been through the mill, know the score, have some experience of God's grace – and can therefore help others.

You remember the words of Rabbi Yenkovitch? He said, "When I get to heaven, God is not going to say to me, 'Why oh why were you not Moses?' God will say to me, 'Why were you not Yenkovitch?'"

We all need to keep remembering that for ourselves. We also need to remember that God is not going to ask us to be some other church. Right now, at this time, in this place, God is asking us to be who WE are.