***CALLED TO…***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

January 15, 2017

Texts: Psalm 40 and John 1:35-42

*The Lord drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog,*

*and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.*

Those words of the psalmist speak for a host of folks across the centuries who have found themselves mired in a mess or sinking in a pit of despair until rescued by God. Perhaps you have been there. James Howell tells of a close friend who suffered terribly but courageously from cystic fibrosis. During one particularly bleak night at the Duke Medical Center, he was sitting with her and her mother, agonizing with her as she fought for the shallowest of breaths. As he stood to leave, James noticed her mother standing by the window looking out blankly into the night. James asked, “Would you like for me to say a prayer?” Her barely audible response numbed him, “Pray if you wish. Nobody’s listening.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Sometimes that is how it seems – like God is strangely silent and nowhere to be found in the pit we find ourselves in; from that desolate place even faithful followers may voice the cry of Jesus from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

 The testimony of the psalmist is that while we may feel abandoned and forsaken, God is there – even in the depths of the pit, even in the miry bog. God is there to comfort and to hold us, to strengthen and sustain us, to grant us hope even in hopeless situations! For the psalmist, God was not only present; God rescued him from that desolate pit and lifted him out of his perilous predicament. “The Lord bent down to me and heard my cry,” says the psalmist. Even the cry of “why have you forsaken me” is heard by God, not as indictment, but as a plea for help. God hears and God responds – though not necessarily in the time and manner we may want. When I was trying to decide whether to leave law for ministry, I set several reasonable deadlines for God to let me know what to do; God missed them all! But in God’s time – not my time – an answer became clear and here I am!

 God hears us. God responds in God’s time. And God saves us, though salvation may not always look quite as we expect. For, God not only saves us ***fro***m something, but as Amy Fetterman likes to say, God saves us ***to*** something. God saved the psalmist ***from*** the desolate pit and miry bog, but God also saved the psalmist ***to*** a life of divine trust and praise. “The Lord put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God,” sings the psalmist. We who are drawn up from the pit or rescued from the bog or healed from a disease or saved from indecision are also called ***to*** something God has in mind for us. Like the psalmist it might be a life of trust and praise to which we are called. Or like Andrew and Peter, we may be called to give up who we’ve been and embrace a whole new life of discipleship as followers of Jesus.

 Jesus calls us one and all to be disciples. The shape of our calls may vary, but the call is consistent – *come and follow me* – or as John articulates it in Jesus’ call to Andrew – *come and see*. Come and see what God is doing; come and see what God may yet do in you and through you. Come and see the new life which Jesus shows us and to which Jesus calls us. That new life may be very different from the old and very different from the life that our culture urges us to lead. As Luke Timothy Johnson reminds us:

*[T]here is a necessary congruence between the character of Jesus’ human life and the character of Christian discipleship. Nowhere in the New Testament is there an image of the human Jesus that is compatible with attitudes of hubris, hedonism, envy, arrogance, acquisitiveness, self-aggrandizement, hostility, or violence. Jesus is everywhere associated with faithful obedience toward God and meek, compassionate, self-emptying service toward other people… we find nowhere in the New Testament an understanding of Christian discipleship compatible with a life devoted to one’s own success, pleasure, comfort, freedom from suffering , or power at the expense of others.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

Narcissists need not apply! For, in choosing to follow Jesus we surrender our self-centered ways and try to live in God’s self-giving way. It is like that message Connie Kurtz found late one Christmas Eve when he opened a box containing pieces of a gym set with some assembly required; the note on top of all the pieces read: “Try our way before you try yours.” That is what discipleship is – trying Jesus’ way instead of our way, trying a way that is marked by obedience and love and forgiveness and grace, a way that is marked by doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God.

 On that path of discipleship that we walk together, we are called to particular forms of service that utilize the gifts with which God has blessed us. Teachers should teach. Doctors and nurses should heal. Farmers should farm. Preachers should preach. Musicians should make music. Mechanics should fix things. Students should study. And retiring from a job that pays you to utilize your gifts does not exempt you from the call to continue to use your gifts in God’s service however and wherever you can.

 Within the life of the church we have distinct calls as well. Some are called to serve as pastors despite the judgment of folks like that woman who asked the young pastor, “Was ministry your own idea or were you just poorly advised?” Some are called to teach Sunday School or to sing in the choir or to bake bread for communion or to visit the sick. And some are called to serve as elders. It is not what they choose to do – it is what they are called to do, called by a God who says, “I will be with you each step of the way.” Today we come to ordain and install elders who have answered God’s call with “Here I am, Lord.” Some of them have been in the desolate pit and miry bog and can testify to God’s saving grace. Some of them have answered this call before and return to serve again. All of them have heard God’s call to serve this church at this time with whatever gifts they have. They didn’t volunteer, they didn’t choose to serve, they were called by a God who has been at work in their lives across the years. What do they have to say about that calling? Listen to them.

*Throughout my life I have come to understand that God has had a direct hand. At times I certainly did not realize this fact as I just figured it was life just turning out the way it did. Maybe it was coincidence or luck. But now as I reflect back it was not those things. I truly believe God was guiding me and is still guiding me….God was at work in my life. God was calling me to a life of service. (John Sayers)*

*I really really really believe that I am a child of the living God, born into the world a sinner in a world of sinners, offered salvation through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ who died for my sins, saved through the love and mercy of God the Father, and charged with following a Christ-centered life throughout all of my days. (Terry Westhafer)*

*Jesus leads me into unknown places and I follow because I believe He will walk by my side and even carry me if I need him to…God’s spirit surrounds me, bolsters me, shows me how to deepen my faith, and leads me to ways that make it even stronger. Serving as an elder is one of these ways. (Melissa Druff)*

*From the onset of my life, I have been blessed by God’s presence as God placed me into a reverent environment that was immersed in the Presbyterian faith. I understand that because I have been blessed by God’s teachings from the scriptures and enriched by the Holy Spirit that I have an obligation and responsibility to consistently strive to be a more devout servant to God, to nurture my faith as well as the faith of others, and to reflect God’s love through my life. (Troy Kurtz)*

*I believe we can all have a personal relationship with God but we will come to that in different ways and at different times, and that the relationship will change throughout our lives. However, as a member of a church community, not only has my faith grown and matured, I can now appreciate the sense of family and belonging that comes with that. The church community can support us emotionally through good times and bad…But beyond that, being an active member of a congregation can challenge us to be more like Jesus as we practice tolerance, acceptance, and forgiveness, as well as opening our eyes to the needs of others. (Laura Stahl)*

*May justice be the arbiter we use in determining the bread, or possessions we truly need as opposed to those we want…May justice, mercy and compassion temper our desire for power, never forgetting that if we are to follow in Christ’s footsteps we must take up the cross and follow Him in servanthood. And may we seek to walk humbly with [God] each day, resisting worldly prestige and status, by clothing ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. (Cliff Gilchrest)*

That’s what it is to be called – called to serve as they are, as you are, as we are. Amen

1. James C. Howell, *The Beauty of the Word*, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2011, p.44 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Luke Timothy Johnson, *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1999, p.200 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)