

“If you’re of a certain age you will remember that wonderful movie Chariots of Fire, which was based on the true story of a world-class Scottish sprinter named Eric Liddell and the 1924 Olympic Games.”<sup>1</sup> Liddell was studying theology at the University of Edinburgh to be a missionary. There is a scene that has imprinted itself in the minds of a lot of people. You may recall it. Liddell – who is a tremendous runner – is up against a difficult and painful decision to continue with the demands of his training for the Games which means he will have to stop his theological studies. He and his sister go on a long walk in the hills to discuss his decision. She argues that he ought to let go of running and continue his studies and stay with God’s call to serve as a missionary. But Liddell says to her, “I believe God has made me for a purpose; but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel his pleasure. To give it up would be to hold him in contempt; to win is to honor him.” He does decide to run. And later has to make the hard decision to go against his church’s teachings about not working on the Sabbath. He eventually finds a way and does indeed set a world record in the 400-yard dash.

“I believe God has made me for a purpose; but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel his pleasure.” These words and his story get at perhaps the most important questions that you and I ever grapple with: what is the purpose of my life? What is my calling? Am I doing the right thing? And these can be frustrating questions as they most often do not have clear-cut answers.

Sometimes the words sound like – I don’t really know what I want to be doing... Or, I don’t like my job but I collect a paycheck.... Or, the pressure from my boss is too much but in this economy what choice do I have... Or, I’m ready to retire, I have my whole life ahead of me, but what will it be?

“It is one of Christianity’s deepest insights – that God calls us,” writes the Rev. Samuel Lloyd, former Dean of Washington National Cathedral. “We have been called into being and given gifts and abilities entirely our own, and out of these we are meant to shape a good, even Godly, life.” We all have a vocation, a calling. It is from the Latin “vocare” which means to call. God has a mission that we are called to participate in!

And many of the call stories the scriptures tell us of – they are rather daunting, like the call of Jesus to the fisherman in today’s gospel. The fisherman had not met Jesus before this encounter, but he says “come follow me” and off they go – immediately, we are told. Simon and Andrew, James and John, leave their nets – that is, their livelihoods and the whole of their lives – and they follow the wandering teacher, Jesus. It’s an inspiring story on the one hand, and on the other, it sounds foolish to us. It sounds impulsive, without forethought or preparation – not how most of us operate. Yet, it is inspiring, their story of faith and commitment. Maybe there was something in the face of Jesus or in the way he spoke that drew them to him and gave them a new sense of being alive. We don’t know how they became so moved to follow, but we do know that their lives were changed, and we can imagine that everything about their lives changed that moment.

Daunting? Yes! As are so many call stories in the Holy Scriptures – voices speak from burning bushes or out of the heavens, God speaks and prophets come into being... with these as our models for God calling us, we may feel left out.

That’s where our friend Jonah comes in, thankfully, in the story from the Hebrew Scriptures. Jonah is not exactly an impressive fellow. He is a complainer. The last thing Jonah wants is to be a prophet! He would much rather be left alone. Have you ever felt that way – why won’t God just leave me alone?! But God doesn’t give up on calling Jonah. God calls Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh to preach repentance. But Jonah wants no part of it so he boards a ship going in the other direction. Nineveh was the despised capital of the Assyrian Empire. Jonah wasn’t about to help these hostile people escape doom. You know

the story – he says no to God, runs the opposite way, but then God brings a great storm, and Jonah knows it is God...when Jonah, thrown overboard, is swallowed by a big fish until he is spewed up on dry land three days later.

Then God tries again to call Jonah. This is the story we have today. God tells Jonah again to go to Nineveh to demand that they repent of their evil ways and return to God. This time Jonah goes and delivers God's message and the people repent, much to Jonah's surprise. And the story ends with Jonah still unhappy because the terrible Assyrians were spared the wrath of God.

How's that for hearing God's call? A bit short on inspiration perhaps but Jonah sounds more like us. He's not sure he wants to hear God's calling, and when he does hear, he is not at all pleased with God. Here is where he speaks to the depths of our soul – the reality that we often do not want God to call us because we are afraid of what we might hear, of what God might ask of us. "We want to have a sense of being close to God," Dean Lloyd preaches, "but on the other hand, what if God asks us to deal with people we don't like, to forgive when we don't want to, to say hard things at work or at home when we'd rather not? What if God asks us what we ourselves are doing to help people who are struggling....what if God asks us to make time in our oh so important, very overloaded lives to grow in our faith? There is good reason to be cautious, Jonah is one of us."

It is so elusive – isn't it – to be called, when we don't actually hear a voice, and it is not a certain moment we can pin-point or an earth-shattering experience. Rather it is, for most of us, a process of listening to our lives, and examining our gifts and recognizing our passions, talking with those we trust and imagining the possibilities...it is asking God to guide us and inspire us as we listen. "Listening for God's call means refusing to ask what I want for my life and to focus on what God wants from the life I have been given." And, for me, it is so often in hind-sight that I "begin to trace the working of God's call." It's the connections, the hints, the surprises, that start to become clear then, showing me how I have been led by God along the way....all along.

I appreciate Dean Lloyd's words: "The issue isn't whether we hear a clear call, it isn't whether we are sure every day that we are doing exactly the right thing, it's whether we sense that ours is a called life, a life that is accountable to God, a life that has a mission, even when we have a hard time articulating it."

"Ours is a called life..." this is what connects us with the fishermen who were called to follow Jesus...connects us with Jonah who God did not give up on calling, even when he was running as fast as he could in the wrong direction. Likewise, God did not give up on the people of Nineveh who needed to repent and return to Godly living. This is our God – who does not give up on us...and who won't stop calling us ever....for ours is a called life....

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<sup>1</sup> The Very Rev. Samuel T. Lloyd III, "What is your calling?" sermon preached at Washington National Cathedral, January 25, 2009, Epiphany III, published on the WNC's website.