

Proper 14, August 12 2012. Nigel Taber-Hamilton.

Today I'd like for us to take a look at some biblical figures as a way of understanding something about the nature of our call as Christians.

Remember Jonah? He heard a voice from God telling him to do what? Go to the people of Nineveh and tell them something from God. And what did he do? He ran in the other direction! Things didn't go well for him.

Then there's the story in 1 Samuel (3) about a young boy who hears a voice and keeps thinking it's his master, Eli. Finally Eli figures it out and tells the boy "no, it's God. Ask him what he wants". And when the young boy – Samuel – does, saying: "speak, Lord; your servant is listening"; God gives him instructions as to what to do next – instructions that form the future shape of his life. And Samuel does as he's directed.

Isaiah has a similar experience (6:1-20). God needs something done and asks Isaiah a direct question: "whom shall I send?" and Isaiah replied "here am I, send me". And God did.

Jeremiah (1:4-6) describes how God went into significant detail about His plans for Jeremiah: "...the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.'" Who was Jeremiah to say "nope"?!

And the list goes on: In Genesis God called Jacob. In Exodus God called Moses out of a burning bush. Both calls received a faithful response.

Such calls aren't limited to the Old Testament. All the gospels talk about the call of the disciples. Most drop everything and follow Jesus, but some don't. In Matthew (8:21) there's this interesting and creative excuse: "I have to bury my father".

Perhaps the most famous is of Paul on the Road to Damascus in Acts 9 – an attention-getting light show is followed-up with some very direct instructions, which Paul follows, and the rest, as they say, is history.

I remember one particular call from the story of one of the early Church leaders quite vividly: Gregory of Nazianzus, who died in 389 A.D. When an old friend, who had become Patriarch of Constantinople, appointed Gregory Bishop of Sasima, Gregory complained that it was "a detestable little place without water or grass or any mark of civilization."

But he went.

So what is the model that the early Church picked the epitomizes this? Acts 1 – a passage called the election of Matthias. The qualifications were simple: "one who has accompanied us throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us."

Then they drew lots!

Apparently the question of qualifications never went beyond simply faithfulness – being a follower – being present on the journey. Largely speaking that's true of all the people I've mentioned. There was no assessment of qualifications except a willingness to serve, to be guided by God.

It was assumed that the Holy Spirit would provide the chosen one all of the gifts and skills required. And I suppose we have to assume that those responsible for the selection of Justus and Matthias as the two candidates felt they had the basic abilities necessary.

For a long time the Acts description of how to discern leadership was THE way it was done. And with good reason.

The model of self-promotion, of “I have a skill, validate it” or “I have a call, validate it”...that model has held sway in north American cultural life. It dominates our political process. To an extent it lies at the heart of the ordination process of our church.

In the last 35 years we’ve been trying to get away from that model. The vision of the baptized as the base unit of Christian identity and belonging emphasizes group discernment. That vision has the community identify individuals it believes can best fulfil a particular need and then – as a community – invite them to fulfil that need.

This is an ancient model – it’s exactly how the Israelites worked in the Book of Judges. Not self-promotion, but community discernment.

Talking about the nature of call is obviously very relevant in light of the fact that in 6 days an election for bishop in Kentucky will take place and I am one of the candidates.

Several of you have said to me, after hearing about my visits to Kentucky, and my participation in that process, “well, whatever you want”.

I appreciate your willingness to allow for choice – and in particular my choice – to enter into this process that – truthfully – we’re all sharing.

But I have never approached the possibility of going to Kentucky from the perspective of what I want. If I did, I wouldn’t have allowed my name to be submitted to that diocese. My name was given to the folk in Kentucky by our bishop here, Greg Rickel. They invited me to consider if my gifts and skills were consonant with the ministry of bishop in their diocese.

Their common wisdom is that the answer to that question for me and for four others is “yes”. As with Matthias and Justus, they have decided that any one of us could fulfil this ministry. Lots will be cast.

I am very relaxed about the outcome because I am so very aware it isn’t in my hands. But I do want to underscore what I’ve talked about with biblical precedents: willfulness and call are not things that go hand-in-hand. The history I outlined suggests – a la Jonah – that when we allow our own desires to enter into God’s equation things don’t always turn out so well!

So today I want to invite you to enter into that place with me of recognizing that the Holy Spirit always has the last word.

There is a last word here about this place we share; it comes from Paul’s letter to the Roman community of believers, where, in chapter 9 he talks about the whole creation groaning in labor pains, including “ourselves” (vs. 22f). Hold onto that idea - whatever the outcome we are in the process of bringing something new into the world – which is what our God always promises – that the whole creation is being made new.

There’s good news, he says: “the Spirit helps us in our weakness” (vs. 26). And then he concludes with this: “[for] we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”

All any of us can do is seek the wisdom of the Spirit as discerned by the community of faith, and recognize that, whatever the outcome, if we love God it will be a good outcome. Amen.