

Date: March 5, 2023 (Lent 2)

1. Texts: Genesis 12:1-4a; Ps. 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17.
2. Subject: discipleship.
3. Topic: obedience.
4. Aim: guide.
5. Proposition: "We, too, can hear God's call through faith and respond in faithful obedience."

## GOD'S CALL, OUR OBEDIENCE

The Jews were the Chosen People of God, and today's reading tells us the story of that call.

Abram is called by God to take his extended family away from the familiar and the familial to a new land—an unknown land—which God will make their new home. Abram doesn't know how that will happen, but that doesn't seem to matter to him. He hears God's call and responds with obedience. The Chosen People are called into existence by God and by their obedient response.

It's absolutely crucial to realize that the Jews remain the Chosen People today. God has not changed his mind nor revoked his choice. Neither has the Christian Church taken the place of the Jews. St. Paul is 100% clear on this issue: the Jews remain the Chosen People of God. The Gentile Christians were only grafted onto the Jewish vine.<sup>1</sup> According to St. Paul, this call of God is "irrevocable"—it cannot be called back. It cannot be reversed. The Jews were and are the Chosen People of God. They were created by God's call and Abram's response in faithful obedience.

Now, just as an aside to this truth: antisemitism is to be rejected by the Christian. If you are an antisemite, you have rejected God and denied Christ. You cannot be an antisemite and a Christian. It is impossible. You must choose one or the other. Back to our theme.

The Jews were and are the Chosen People. God called them, and Abram responded with obedience. Call and obedience created the Jews. We Christians

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 11:11-24.

can share in that call and obedience. We can be grafted onto the Jewish vine through faith. Here's how we can think about this.

We know that Christian faith is a relationship with God through Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. That relationship is built on love, trust, self-sacrifice and submission to the will of God. That is, God calls us into relationship with him, and we respond with love, trust, self-sacrifice and surrender. God begs us to return to him, and we find the obedience to enter into faith. It may be hard to put into words, but the reality is clear: God calls out to us, and we turn to him in love, trust, self-sacrifice and submission—exactly as Abram did those millennia ago. That's how we Christians are grafted onto the vine of the Chosen People.

But exactly how do we hear that call from God? Abram heard an actual voice. Few of us ever do. So, how does God call us?

The call of God seems to come primarily through other people. Few of us, if any at all, experience a genuine miracle in a way that makes us turn to God in faith. God doesn't shout down at us, "Hey, you there! Wake up and get your faith in gear or you're going to end up in big trouble!"

God called me through the family of an Anglican priest. God called my wife through the witness of her parents and the involvement of parish churches. The apostles responded in faith because of the interaction with Jesus. The call of God most frequently comes through people.

Of course, we have to be open to hearing the call. A closed spirit, wrapped up in resentment, anger, pride or hate, is not going to hear God's call to love, grace and forgiveness. We have to be willing to confess that there is a God who is calling out to us in love. Heck, we have to be willing to be loved by God, if we are to hear the call of God coming through other people.

That call *from* God is looking for faithful obedience *to* God as the response. We can't say, "Thank you, God, for calling out to me. I believe in you. Now let me get back to my real life." So, God calls and he expects faithful obedience in response.

But actually figuring out how to be faithful can be a bit tricky—or maybe, we make it out to be tricky.

It's actually easy enough to sketch the outline of our obedience. God is calling us to love him with all we are and to love our neighbours as God loves them. Broadly understood, that's pretty clear.

So, God calls us to faith, and we respond to him with love, trust, self-sacrifice and surrender. God calls us to faith, and we respond with love for, trust in, self-sacrifice on behalf of and service to other people. We respond to others in the same way we respond to God. That's pretty clear, too.

We could put it even more simply: God calls out to us through others, and we respond to others in the ways God responds to us. We do to and for others, what Jesus would do to and for us.

So far this entire sermon has been fairly basic. Each of us could say, "We've heard this all before." It's like what St. Paul once wrote to the Corinthians: "And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather...as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food..."<sup>2</sup> So, where's the real challenge in all this spiritual milk?

The challenge is that we who are involved in this sermon have to be prepared to deliver God's call to others. That's part and parcel of our obedience in faith. You and I have to develop the courage to be God's mouthpieces for the sake of others. As God has delivered his call to us through others, we have to be the voice of God calling out to others.

This requires a certain listening technique.

With one ear, we listen to the person in front of us. We're listening to comprehend their needs, hurts and desires. We listening to understand where

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:1-2.

God might fit into their lives. For lack of a better term, this is a kind of “deep listening”, in which we listen to souls.

With our other ear, we are listening to God. We are listening for God’s prompting, telling us, “Now’s the time to speak for me. Speak to this person of my love, grace and forgiveness.”

Now, not every conversation requires this two-sided listening. Not every relationship can bear the weight of such conversations. But when your relationship with God and with another person is healthy enough, some conversations need to be pursued. God has no voice on earth but ours, and there will be days when our obedience means God will use us to speak on his behalf.

What may have seemed like spiritual milk served to spiritual infants has become something with potentially far-reaching implications. But such as always been the case since the time of Abram. Abram was called by God, and he responded with faithful obedience, which led to the creation of a Jewish homeland, which is still having implications today. Each of us has been called by God, and we are seeking to respond with faithful obedience. There will be occasions when that response will challenge us to speak on God’s behalf to someone else. It may be that God will use you to bring someone else to salvation.

God called, and Abram responded, which created the Jewish people. God has called each of us, and we are responding with love, trust, self-sacrifice and surrender. Whether we are chosen like the Jews or adopted as Christians, faithful obedience is the response God is looking for. This is just part of what it means to be called by God.

AMEN.