

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
June 8, 2008
Woodhaven Presbyterian Church
10th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Ordination and Installation of Officers
Genesis 12:1-9; Matthew 9:9-13

Eyes and Feet

Both of these stories – the one in Genesis and the one in Matthew—both of them start very abruptly to me. As you read each one, you feel like you have come into a movie theatre ten minutes after the show has started and you need your friend to whisper to you what you have missed. Abram’s call and Matthew’s call feel that way to me. I want to go and get the background – the verses and the stories that come before these two texts. I want to let them get us organized and set the scene to make Abram, Sarai, and Matthew’s calls make better sense.

Surely, the fact that God chose and called them will make better sense if we just learn more about them. And yet, when we do go back a few verses, we realize that no set-ups are to be found. Nothing in their past helps their stories make any sense. We have not come in late at all. As a matter of fact, we seem to arrive in their stories right on time.

If you travel back a chapter in the book of Genesis to get a glimpse of Abram and Sarai’s background, you find Noah’s descendants busily constructing a tower, the tower that came to be known as the Tower of Babel. “Come,” they say to each other, “let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens and *let us make a name for ourselves...*” Uh oh. It seems that Noah’s kin have already forgotten what happens when humanity fancies becoming divine. And, even if the rather relatively recent memory of the Ark and the Flood get glossed over, all they had to do was remember the Garden.

Adam and Eve tried a similar tactic. They, like Noah’s descendants, became less interested in being creature and more interested in becoming Creator. They wanted to know what only God can know, so that they might make *a name for themselves* and live in the realm of the divine. So they get tossed out of the Garden and the pattern of human sinfulness and brokenness begins. And in Genesis 11, Noah’s kin also find themselves thrown out from their soon-to-be gleaming city, scattered far and wide, divided and broken.

And the rest of Genesis 11 names the generations of this scattered, divided, broken people, right up until it stops with Abram and his wife Sarai. They are living with his father Terah, until he dies. And that, my friends, is it. That synopsis is the whole background to this call story. That is all of the set-up, all of the organization, all of the help we get. And I think it is just so abrupt. We move from this depressing background of a divided and broken humanity immediately into “Now the Lord said to Abram, Go.”

We have no idea why God chose to get involved in that moment of our history. But even more than that, we have no idea why God chose Abram in the first place. Remember—there are no people of Israel yet. There is no circumcision. There is no particular covenant or choosing of a particular people for the sake of the whole world. None of that predates Abram. So, personally, I would have liked to know a bit more about the man. I would have liked knowing his gifts, the traits that would make him a good spiritual leader.

If I had written the story, I might have included a brief bio – sort of like what we did with our officers-elect whom we will ordain and install later this morning. Each of them had a nice write-up as to why we feel God has both gifted and called them to spiritual leadership here at Woodhaven. I think that could have been helpful to have that information about Abram and Sarai. Because if we could see information like that, then it might make more sense as to why God interrupted history and called THEM.

And frankly, while we are at it, I would have appreciated a little background information about Matthew, too. His call story is even more abrupt than Abram and Sarai's. At least their names are mentioned in Genesis chapter 11. If you look back in chapter nine of the Gospel, you find absolutely nothing about Matthew. Not one iota of information. Instead, we read about Jesus' teachings and healing ministry. No word about any person named Matthew. The first time we hear his name is with verse 9 – "As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And Matthew got up and followed Jesus."

Again, I would have liked a bit more of a bio, a nice write-up of why Matthew was going to make a good spiritual leader. Because if you just read verse 9, things are not looking good. Did you notice where Matthew was sitting when Jesus called him? Behind the tax booth. That is not a good thing in Jesus' time. As Tom Long writes, "Tax collectors were carp feeding off the river bottom of Roman rule. For Jesus to call a tax collector as a disciple would be as if he were today to call... a narcotics detective on the take, a mafia don on the CIA payroll. Shady, to say the least."¹

And yet, that is all we know of Matthew. Well, that is all we know until Jesus sees him that day. Jesus walks by his booth. He sees Matthew, just as he is, and he calls for him to follow. And Matthew, without one question, without seemingly any pause, gets up and follows. Even based on the little we know about Matthew, his reaction is shocking. Jesus sees him. Jesus calls him. Matthew gets up. Matthew follows.

And turning back to Genesis, we watch as the same thing happens with Abram and Sarai. One minute, they are living in Haran, seemingly doing just fine. Now, granted, we know they are not completely fine for we read that they are both quite old but without any children. In that day and time, having no heir immediately puts them in jeopardy. Who would take care of you if you got sick? To whom would you leave your land? Life was pretty tenuous if you lived without the security of future generations. So, we do need to notice that they are living life on the fringes.

And yet, God sees them just as they are. And God calls for them to follow. And Abram and Sarai, without one question at this point, without seemingly any pause, get up, gather the entire household, and head out to only God knows where to do what only God knew. Even based on the little we know about Abram and Sarai, their reactions are shocking. God sees them. God calls them. Abram and Sarai get up. Abram and Sarai follow.

So we have to ask, don't we, what is going on in these two stories? What are we missing that might help make sense both of how God acts, and, how Abram, Sarai, and Matthew react? In Genesis, we have an old couple who stand on the fringes because they do not have an heir, and in the Gospel, we have a younger (we assume) man who stands on the fringes because of what he does for a living. I don't know how **you** feel, but none of them strike me as particularly inviting characters.

I bet if we were to write their bios, the paragraphs might be rather short, filled with regular mundane information. None of them stand out for much of anything. My guess is that if we were to walk by them, we might just pass on by—not really seeing much about them at all, certainly not seeing anything special.

But don't you wonder if that might be the difference, the missing piece to our understanding? You and I, well we might very well look at them and see nothing special, certainly nothing that cries out "spiritual leaders" or "disciples." As a matter of fact, when you and I look at Abram and Sarai, we might simply see two old people who are living their last days on the fringes, in a rather tenuous situation.

But apparently, God sees something else when God looks at them. Whereas we see their life situation as dangerous, God sees it full of possibilities. Whereas we see them as possibly too old, God sees them at just the right age for change and a new beginning. Whereas we see them as nothing special, no one to write home about, God looks into their faces and hearts and sees echoes of the beginning. “So God created humankind in God’s image, in the image of God he created them, male and female, God created them.”

When we look at Abram and Sarai, we do not see anything special. But when God looks at Abram and Sarai, God sees them and decides to show them God’s claim on their lives. “Go,” God says to Abram. “Take your family to the land I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you all will be a blessing.” God sees them. God loves them. God claims them. God calls them. And their faith is born and their feet start moving.

And I don’t know what you and I would have done if we had encountered Matthew that day, sitting behind his tax booth. We might very well look at him and see nothing special, certainly nothing that cries out “spiritual leader” or “disciple.” As a matter of fact, when you and I look at Matthew, we might even mutter something to ourselves about exploitation, greed, disloyalty. We may even purposefully look right past him—our way of discounting his humanity, taking his outsider status and rubbing it in his face.

But thank goodness, God’s Love Enfleshed, Jesus, sees something else when he looks at Matthew. Whereas we see his life stuck forever in a pattern of exploitation and greed, Jesus sees an open heart for repentance and change. Whereas we see him as unclean, as an outsider, as too sinful and too far gone, Jesus sees him at just the right place for newness and possibility. Whereas we see Matthew as nothing special, no one to write home about, Jesus looks into his face and sees his own face reflected back. Jesus looks into Matthew’s worn eyes, into his heart, into his soul, and sees etchings of the divine presence.

When you and I look at Matthew, we do not see anything special. But when Jesus looks at him, Jesus sees him and decides to show him God’s claim on his life. Jesus walks by his booth and says, “Follow me.” Jesus sees him. Jesus loves him. Jesus claims him. Jesus calls him. And Matthew’s faith is born and his feet start moving.

I really wonder if this whole seeing thing is the missing piece, the needed information, the proper set-up to help their calls make more sense. Apparently, God looks at us creatures and sees way beyond what we see. We may look in the mirror and see no one special. We may look in the mirror and see ourselves as too far gone, as too young or too old, as too ordinary or too fearful. But, according to Scripture, God looks at our faces, at our hearts, at our souls, and hears echoes of the divine beginning, “And God saw everything that God had made and indeed it was very good.” God looks into our worn eyes and worn-out souls and sees etchings of the divine presence. God looks at our brokenness and notices how it is through the cracks that the light shines most brilliantly.

You and I might look in the mirror, or even at one another, and not see anyone particularly special, no one to write home about, but God sees us and decides to make God’s claim known on our lives. “Have courage,” God tells us. “Follow me,” Jesus calls. God sees us. God loves us. God claims us. God calls us. And, just perhaps, maybe our own faith is born or renewed and our own feet start moving. Amen.

¹ Long, Tom. Matthew. Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press.