



I Have Called You by Name

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We generally associate the term ministry with the work that clergy do, those ordained by the church to preach, administer sacraments, provide pastoral care, and tend to office matters. But the term ministry describes much more than the professional occupation we are all familiar with. Ministry refers to the call to service that the Lord makes to all people who believe in his name. It is the call to care for each other as spiritual beings. This morning we will look briefly at several biblical images that speak about this call to ministry.

EXODUS 3:1-17

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am." He said

further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I am has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’:

This is my name forever,

and this my title for all generations.

Go and assemble the elders of Israel, and say to them, ‘The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying: I have given heed to you and to what has been done to you in Egypt. I declare that I will bring you up out of the misery of Egypt, to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.’¹

While tending the flocks for his father-in-law, Moses’ attention is caught by an wondrous sight: a flame that burns but does not consume. He finds himself on “holy ground”; that is to say, he is brought into a spiritual perception of life, made more sensitive to deeper levels of reality. There he encounters the Lord, the living God, who calls him from the mundane tasks of his occupation to pursue a higher mission, the liberation of God’s people.

It has happened to all of us, hasn’t it? Well, it has. Our presence here this morning indicates it. We have all been called and inspired by the Lord, we have all been caught off guard in the midst of our normal routines and involvements. We have all been attracted, at one time or another, to something marvelous, attractive, mysterious, something profoundly good in the midst of our lives. We have all encountered the flame that burns but does not consume; that is to say, we have all experienced a love that warms but does not consume, a love that gives of itself without the need to dominate or

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possess, a love that serves without “burning out.” This is God’s love. And we have all felt the call that this love makes to us, as it summons us to something more real, more important than our personal agenda. The call that love makes to us is the call of liberation from spiritual captivity, salvation from inner oppression, and from all that keeps us from reaching out to one another in a spirit of active love, a spirit of ministry. It is a call that poses an enormous challenge to us, and yet it is accompanied by a promise of grace, favor, and blessings that is nothing short of heaven itself.

ISAIAH 6:1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;

the whole earth is full of his glory.”

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said:

“Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

A similar image: Like Moses, Isaiah is caught up by a vision of the Lord, an undeniable sense of the presence of the divine. Instead of the brilliance of the burning

bush, we have the image of the temple filled with smoke: a presence that is revealing and hidden at the same time. It is not only the Lord's presence which is revealed to Isaiah, but at the same time his sin, his need for repentance. And like Moses, whose bare feet represented an attitude of humility, Isaiah is led to an experience of confession. He confesses his own inability to measure up to the requirements of spiritual life. And it is precisely this confession, this act of contrition, this acknowledgment of sin and brokenness that leads him to the experience of forgiveness and renewal. By it, he is made whole, healed, and empowered. He knows himself now in a new way; he is awakened, attentive to God's Word, and eager to pursue the commission he is given: to serve the Lord by serving others. "Here am I, send me!"

The burning coal, by which he is spiritually healed, like the burning bush, represents the power of God's love to forgive and make new. Like the flame that did not consume, we have a live coal which does not burn, but heals, preparing for ministry.

PSALM 139:1-18

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

You know when I sit down and when I rise up;

you discern my thoughts from far away.

You search out my path and my lying down,

and are acquainted with all my ways.

Even before a word is on my tongue,

O Lord, you know it completely.

*You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.*

*Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.*

Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there;

if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

If I take the wings of the morning

and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

even there your hand shall lead me,

and your right hand shall hold me fast.

If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,

and the light around me become night,"

even the darkness is not dark to you;

the night is as bright as the day,

for darkness is as light to you.

For it was you who formed my inward parts;

you knit me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Wonderful are your works;

that I know very well.

My frame was not hidden from you,

when I was being made in secret,

intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.

In your book were written

all the days that were formed for me,

when none of them as yet existed.

How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!

How vast is the sum of them!

I try to count them—they are more than the sand;

I come to the end—I am still with you.

In days gone by, one's name often reflected one's occupation. The surnames Baker, Butler, Cook, and Miller, are obvious examples. Schneider, which means "to cut" in German, was a common name for a tailor. Nowadays, of course, such names have for the most part become divorced from their origins. There is a spiritual significance to names, however, that goes much deeper than one's occupation. Understood spiritually, one's "name" refers to the spiritual quality of the person, the type of choices they make between God and self, between things of the world and the neighbor. This is how names are used throughout scripture: to describe spiritual qualities.

To say that the Lord knows us intimately is always an understatement. God’s knowledge of us, of who we are, what we were created for, what we’re capable of, so far exceeds our own knowledge of ourselves, that we cannot even *imagine* how complete it is. It truly is so high that we cannot attain it. It is so high, in fact, that we easily forget that such knowledge exists. We go through life, for the most part, oblivious to the complexity and depth of our spiritual nature, our true identity, our real purpose in life. We are quick to set our own agendas, define our own needs, and plot our own courses.

But the Lord, as we said, knows us in a different way; as he knew what Moses and Isaiah were capable of, with his help, even though they felt unworthy. The Lord calls us by name because the Lord knows who we really are what we are capable of. And because of this, he knows what it is we should be doing, what we were created for. In God’s eyes, our identity makes one with the uses we are to be performing. Each of us was created to be a unique expression of God’s steadfast love and wisdom. Because God created us as spiritual beings, we are to be about our Father’s business, each in his or her own way. To learn of our spiritual identity from God, from his Word, is at the same time to acknowledge our relationship to God, and the call to ministry in his name.

MATTHEW 4:18-25

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of

Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

Again, we see the Lord calling people away from their external concerns, away from their familiar patterns and identity, to something qualitatively higher. From fishing to healing; from struggling to survive physically, to struggling to be born and live spiritually. It was the disciples who were “caught” by God, pulled out of their normal routine, from their immersion in their occupations; called to a new path, with a new vocation, a new purpose. They too, it seemed, had seen in Jesus a vision similar to that seen by Moses and Isaiah; a compelling vision that led them to observe, follow, and obey, to join in the task of building God’s kingdom.

Can we hear this call? Can we redirect our energy, our attention, our very selves and identity from natural to spiritual concerns? Can we respond to the Lord’s call to ministry in his name, claiming our spiritual birthright in God, and celebrating our spiritual kinship with all people? Can we allow ourselves to be named by God, brought into the light, pulled from our *pre*-occupations with external matters, and set on a new path of service and self-giving?

We are all called to minister, each in different ways, performing different spiritual uses in God’s garden. As we pursue God’s call to serve higher, unseen purposes in our

lives, we become what Swedenborg calls a church, a living expression of God's love and truth. Unlike the more narrow concerns of our individual occupations, ministry in God's name brings each of us into a larger fellowship, where each is centered on the common goal of discerning and doing God's will. It is this common commitment to the highest reality, to God, which alone can unite and harmonize our individual efforts and unique perceptions. For in doing God's will, we are called to examine ourselves and to reach out to others; in ministry, inner work and outward service are inseparable.

Through ministry, genuine community is built. Ministry is a state of being and a state of doing: it is a state of being humbly open to the light of God's truth, which reveals us to ourselves; and it is an active state of performing uses for others in a spirit of genuine charity and good-will.

By pursuing our own ministries, by responding to God's call to serve in his name, we experience freedom and deliverance from our lower selves, we find our world transformed, and ourselves more at home in it. While most people complain that they cannot identify with their work, those who pursue their ministries can find themselves nowhere else.

How do you find your ministry, the specific tasks that the Lord is calling you to? We've seen how it is done. First, stop what you're doing, pay attention, look up; let the sheep go for a while, put aside your nets, your busy schedule. Next, consider the limits of your knowledge, your intentions, your abilities; take off your shoes, cleanse your thoughts, and open yourself to God in a spirit of humility and sincerity. Then, courageously accept God's forgiveness, God's promise of freedom and redemption. Consider not only your own limits and God's power, but also God's infinite love and

mercy, and your great need of this precious gift. Then, courageously accept God's forgiveness, God's promise of freedom and redemption. And finally, simply follow the Lord, applying in your life that truths and insights that you hold dear. Seek peace and pursue justice, serve and minister, redeem and liberate, heal and make whole, renew your spirit and build community.

“Thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.”

-Isaiah 43

