

“Calling You”

Third Sunday after Epiphany

Matthew 4:12-23

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Saint Paul, Minnesota

Friends, it's been a rough week. It's been rough month.

After Friday's events, so many people felt good energy and hope again, inspired by the sea of people in downtown Minneapolis, the protests, the prayer vigils and worship services.

And, then, yesterday happened. Another killing. And all the outrage, fear, and confusion threatened to overwhelm us again.

But, we did something last night. The collective “we” of the Twin Cities and folks around the nation. We gathered on our block with our neighbors, lighting candles in memory of Alex Jeffrey Pretti.

On my street corner, 27 of us gathered. I met neighbors I'd never met before, including a couple of members of this church! We could see folks gathered at other nearby intersections. According to our neighborhood Facebook group, some street corners sang songs together, others were serving sambusas around a fire pit. We had brownies and hot cocoa and rocked to Tracy Chapman and Prince.

Holding our candles in the darkness and the bitter cold reminded me of every Christmas Eve liturgy I've ever participated in. What we always symbolize in that worship service every year, we were now enacting in real life—Holding our lights in defiance of evil.

And today we gather together in worship. We sing the songs, pray the prayers, listen to the stories, proclaim a word of God for today.

So, relying upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit, I offer this word to you.

Hear now the good news from the Gospel according to Matthew.

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
 on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the gentiles—
 the people who sat in darkness
 have seen a great light,
 and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
 light has dawned.”

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

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 fishers. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of 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 all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

For the Word of God in scripture,
 For the Word of God within us,
 For the Word of God among us,
 Thanks be to God.

I accepted the call to follow Jesus when I was five years old. I grew up in a Southern Baptist Church, in a small town in Oklahoma. Which means I came forward during an altar call at the close of worship and professed my faith in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. Besides my parents, the most important influence guiding me to that moment, was my Kindergarten Sunday school teacher, Ruth Robinson. A stereotypical Kindergarten Sunday school teacher of that era—elderly, short, bright white permed hair, thick glasses, but, most importantly, a tender, gracious, loving soul.

Of course, I understood very little about Christian faith and discipleship at the age of five or the full ramifications of what I was committing myself to. But there is a simple beauty in the faith expression of a young child.

In short order, I felt the further call to ministry. I've told you before about that drawing assignment in my first-grade class, when our teacher asked us to illustrate what we wanted to be when we grew up, and I drew myself preaching at a pulpit, with my mother sitting and listening on the front pew.

What attracted a first grader to preaching? Well, I was a talker back then. So much so that my first-grade teacher moved my desk into the corner of the classroom for six weeks, in order to try to keep me from talking to my classmates. I think I really confused her because I was both the best student in the class and the one who wouldn't quit talking.

So, I'm guessing that in some way I was drawn to the idea that the preacher got to stand up in front of a few hundred people every week to talk and people listened.

I also know that as I progressed through elementary school, I was drawn to be a preacher because the pastor's office was called the "pastor's study," and it was a room lined with bookshelves, full of books. I was such a nerd about books and reading and libraries that nothing seemed more appealing than a life surrounded by books. If you've been in my office here at House of Hope, you know it achieves that childhood fascination.

Whatever inroads the Holy Spirit used to call an elementary school kid into Christian ministry, they worked. And those flames were nurtured by teachers, summer camp counselors, youth directors, older congregants fascinated by this precocious young churchman, and my childhood pastor Jerry Field.

Jerry first invited me to preach on a youth Sunday when I was 14. That fact isn't all that remarkable. What is remarkable is that he continued to invite me to fill the pulpit with some regularity throughout my teenage years. The most challenging early preaching experience I remember, is that I was the scheduled preacher on the Sunday after the United States entered into the first Gulf War. My home congregation ran about 700 people in Sunday morning worship at that time. And I was only 17 years old, having to form words to address people's fears and anxieties as we went to war.

In my experience, God hasn't only called me once or twice. Yes, there was the call to become a follower of Jesus. And there was the call to Christian ministry. But throughout my life there have been calls from God.

Back in 2002 I was serving as the youth minister at a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship congregation in Fayetteville, Arkansas, organizing a mission trip to the city of Helena, Arkansas over on the other side of the state in the Delta of the Mississippi River. Our denomination was focusing mission efforts on the 20 poorest counties in the nation, and two of those were in Arkansas. In the cotton belt, an area that had experienced, at that

time, thirty years of economic collapse and the still lingering effects of segregation and the struggle for civil rights.

When I took the scouting trip to Helena, months in advance of the actual mission trip, two women who lived and worked there as community organizers took me around town to show me the extreme poverty of the community. There were neighborhoods that did not have indoor plumbing. In 2002 in the United States. There were areas where people lived in houses that I wouldn't keep livestock in. The once vibrant black business district lay blighted. And the signs of racial injustice, historic and current, were everywhere.

Such as when they drove me along a road out of town to see the cemeteries. First, we drove past the big, beautiful white cemetery, full of ornate and monumental graves. Then, there was a smaller Jewish cemetery, well adorned, but modest. Then, the pavement ended, and the road turned to gravel, and we finally reached the Black cemetery. Much of it overgrown and you could tell people struggled to maintain it.

I experienced that trip as a revelation, an epiphany, my eyes opened to realities of poverty and racial injustice that I had only understood intellectually before but now I understood in my heart and in my soul.

And that experience in Helena was also a call. A call to a different kind of Christian ministry. One that centered justice. A ministry that prioritized trying to address the social needs of the communities around us.

God has continued to call. I experienced my coming out as a gay man as a call from God to personal authenticity and a different type of pastoral ministry that included more advocacy and activism.

Not all of God's calls have been related to my professional ministry. I felt the call to become a father. I've felt the call to teach and to write. And I've felt God's call in individual moments of attachment, resonance, and delight.

We Protestants believe that all children of God receive a call. A call to follow Jesus as a disciple. And a call to some form of ministry, even if it is not the preaching or the pastoral office. Plumbers and school teachers and physicians and CEOs, all are called of God to live out their faith and spirituality in their daily lives.

Friends, I believe God is calling us right now. As Americans and Minnesotans, as people of faith and as the House of Hope Presbyterian Church.

All of our Christian education and spiritual formation have prepared us for this moment. All those stories we learned in Sunday school--like Moses confronting Pharaoh, David's courage before Goliath, Daniel in the lion's den, or Paul and Silas singing in prison—were preparation for now.

All those adult Bible studies and prayer retreats and officer trainings, were God shaping us as disciples.

All those moments of taking hot dishes to a sick person, holding the hands of the dying, hugging the widows, preparing food for the hungry, buying Christmas presents for the needy, writing letters to our Congresspersons, all of that too was God's preparation.

Even all those business meetings where we learned how to disagree and still love one another.

And, most especially, all those worship services, where we sang our praise and thanksgiving, received God's grace in baptism and communion, and heard the Word of God spoken for today.

All of that was God shaping us and forming us.

And *now*, God is calling.

Calling in a moment of crisis that is as local as it comes. Our community is hurting. Our neighbors are suffering violence and indignity and cruelties that we never imagined we'd see where we lived. We are ourselves overcome with emotion and pain.

Now is the time to put all of our Christian faith formation and discipleship to work.

Mariame Kaba and Kelly Hayes write, "To resist the erosion of empathy, we must invite people to participate in acts of care, defense, aid, and rescue."

So, I'm inviting you to participate in care, defense, aid and rescue.

But I don't believe it's just me that's inviting you. I believe it is God who is calling you to care for and support your neighbor in this moment.

What is the second greatest commandment? One of the core teachings of our entire religious tradition over the last 4000 years?

Love your neighbor, as yourself.

And right now, all of our neighbors need our love.

God is calling you.

And just like God does when God calls us into a ministry or a vocation, there is no one way for us to be followers of Jesus in this moment. In fact, God needs us all to follow in different ways so that the work might be accomplished.

God is calling some of you to stand on highway overpasses and intersections with signs.

God is calling some of you to carry your whistles and your cell phones in order to protect your neighbors.

God is calling some of you to drive the children of frightened families to school.

God is calling some of you to volunteer your time at food shelves and mutual aid societies.

God is calling some of you to march in protest.

God is calling some of you to donate money to those helping our neighbors.

God is calling some of you to provide the balms we need when hurting—the music, the poems, the art, the dance.

God is calling all of you to strengthen bonds with your neighbors. To check in on each other.

God is calling all of us to bear witness. To see what is happening. To see the cruelty and the violence and the lies and the evil. To record it for now and for posterity. To remember. For to see and to remember are themselves acts of faithful resistance.

God is calling all of us to pray. And to pray like we have never prayed before.

God is calling all of us to take care of ourselves and our families and our loved ones. If there's nothing else you are able to do in this moment, then pour out your love and affection upon those closest to you.

And look to yourself. You're experiencing so many emotions. They have the tendency to overwhelm. So do your very best to stay emotionally regulated. To feel those emotions deeply, but to feel and to express them in ways that are healthy.

And hear me when I say this. God is calling all of us to not give up. Not to sink into despair or hopelessness or be overcome by fear and anxiety and dread or to give into our rage.

No, God is calling forth all that is best about us—our compassion, our courage, our determination, our pragmatic ability to get things done, our joyfulness, and, most importantly our hope.

And *that* is particularly our call here. We are, after all, the House of Hope. And have been since 1855. We were the House of Hope during the Civil War.

And we *must be* the House of Hope in our time.

Friends, you are not expected to hope in this moment alone. I don't think we can hope by ourselves. We must do it together. Hard won, in the midst of strife.

We can hope together because we are a church of Christ followers, created and beloved by God, empowered by the Holy Spirit, radiating with divine glory.

Here are Hayes and Kaba again:

By building community and cultivating a sense of belonging between alienated people, we can begin a courageous process of dreaming new possibilities into being. We can also invite people to imagine what's possible by modeling and rehearsing the world as it should be in real time, in the spaces, groups, and relationships that we build.

To do that work—of mutual aid, care, and community building—is, I believe, the core of God's call upon us.

Not only to see us through this present crisis,
but so that when this too passes,
as we know it will,
we might be a better, stronger community,
developing the skills and the resources to carry out God's mission upon the Earth.

Friends, this is a difficult time. You are frightened and anxious and angry and uncertain of what to do and what the future holds. Here is the Word of God for you today—
you, my friends, are beloved children of God,
filled with power and with glory,
disciples whom God has been preparing precisely for this time,
gifted by the Holy Spirit, with everything you require to respond to the urgency of the moment.

Now's the time. You are ready.

And God is calling.