

The Transforming Power of God's Surprising Call

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June 6, 2010

Sermon Text: Galatians 1:11-24 *The Message*

Paul writes to the Galatians:

Know this – I am most emphatic here, friends- this great Message I delivered to you is not mere human optimism. I didn't receive it through the traditions, and I wasn't taught it in some school. I got it straight from God, received the Message directly from Jesus Christ.

I'm sure that you've heard the story of my earlier life when I lived in the Jewish way. In those days I went all out in persecuting God's church. I was systematically destroying it. I was so enthusiastic about the traditions of my ancestors that I advanced head and shoulders above my peers in my career. Even then God had designs on me. Why, when I was still in my mother's womb he chose and called me out of sheer generosity! Now he has intervened and revealed his Son to me so that I might joyfully tell non-Jews about him.

Immediately after my calling – without consulting anyone around me and without going up to Jerusalem to confer with those who were apostles long before I was – I got away to Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus, but it was three years before I went up to Jerusalem to compare stories with Peter. I was there only fifteen days-but what days they were! Except for our Master's brother James, I saw no other apostles. (I'm telling you the absolute truth in this.)

Then I began my ministry in the regions of Syria and Cilicia. After all that time and activity I was still unknown by face among the Christian churches in Judea. Their response was to recognize and worship God because of me!

This month during worship we will be exploring Paul's letter to the Galatian churches. In today's excerpt we heard a brief clip of Paul's testimony. We heard of his zeal for persecuting the followers of Jesus, of systematically trying to destroy God's church because he was overly enthusiastic when it came to keeping the traditions of his Jewish ancestors. Then Paul declares – “God has intervened and revealed his Son to me so that I might joyfully tell non-Jews about him.” With one sentence in this particular testimony Paul's life is powerfully transformed. Through Paul's new experience with God, God has surprisingly revealed a new call for Paul's life.

Listen now to a more descriptive account of Paul's journey before and after his call.

In this account, Paul has been arrested. He is on his way to Rome to be heard before Caesar, and right now he is being heard by King Agrippa.

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Acts 26

Agrippa spoke directly to Paul: "Go ahead – tell us about yourself."

Paul took the stand and told his story. "From the time of my youth, my life has been lived among my own people in Jerusalem. Practically every Jew in town who watched me grow up- and if they were willing to stick their necks out they'd tell you in person – knows that I lived as a strict Pharisee, the most demanding branch of our religion. It's because I believed it and took it seriously, committed myself heart and soul to what God promised my ancestors – the identical hope, mind you, that the twelve tribes have lived for night and day all these centuries.

I admit that I didn't always hold to the position I now hold. For a time I thought it was my duty to oppose this Jesus of Nazareth with all my might. Backed with the full authority of the high priests, I threw these believers – I had no idea they were God's people! – into the Jerusalem jail right and left, and whenever it came to a vote, I voted for their execution. I stormed through their meeting places, bullying them into cursing Jesus, a one-man terror obsessed with obliterating these people. And then I started on the towns outside Jerusalem.

One day on my way to Damascus, armed as always with papers from the high priests authorizing my action, right in the middle of the day a blaze of light, light outshining the sun, poured out of the sky on me and my companions. Oh, King, it was so bright! We fell flat on our faces. Then I heard a voice in Hebrew: 'Saul, Saul, why are you out to get me? Why do you insist on going against the grain?'

I said, 'Who are you, Master?'

The voice answered, 'I am Jesus, the One you're hunting down like an animal. But now, up on your feet- I have a job for you. I've handpicked you to be a servant and witness to what's happened today, and to what I am going to show you.

'I'm sending you off to open the eyes of the outsiders so they can see the difference between dark and light, and choose light, see the difference between Satan and God, and choose God. I'm sending you off to present my offer of sins forgiven, and a place in the family, inviting them into the company of those who begin real living by believing in me.'

"What could I do, King Agrippa? I couldn't just walk away from a vision like that! I became an obedient believer on the spot. I started preaching this life-change--this radical turn to God and everything it meant in everyday life-right there in Damascus. Then I went on to Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside, and from there to the whole world."

The Transforming Power of God's Surprising Call – Paul went from persecuting, even executing, followers of Christ to sharing the Good News of Christ with others, even others outside the Jewish faith (that was unheard of.) But what is even more amazing, more transforming (at least for me) is that he turned from his violent behavior to adopt an attitude of LOVE. In Galatians 5 he says, "For in Christ, neither our most conscientious religion nor disregard of religion amounts to anything. What matters is something far more interior: faith

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expressed in love." He goes on to say, "Use your freedom [in Christ] to serve one another in love...For everything we know about God's Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself....If you bite and ravage each other, watch out—in no time at all you will be annihilating each other..." (Galatians 5:14,15)

It sounds like two completely different people. When God revealed God's self to Paul, Paul was transformed by the power of the call. He went from persecutor to apostle, from deadly violence to abounding love. Paul's story testifies to how the "revelation of Jesus Christ turned Paul's world upside down and made him an instrument of God's reconciling grace, reaching out to those who had previously been strangers to the covenants of promise" (Richard Hays, *New Interpreter's Bible*, p.220).

Another important aspect of the story that grabs my attention is that first God reveals God's self to Paul AND then Paul responds to and accepts the call. As he tells King Agrippa, "*What could I do, King Agrippa? I couldn't just walk away from a vision like that! I became an obedient believer on the spot. I started preaching this life-change*"

You know it's one thing to know and believe that God's call has the power to transform you and it's another thing to accept the call and be willing to be transformed. It's not too often these days that we hear of God calling someone with a bright shining light or a burning bush, but God does still call us.

Our Church Covenant, which we often read as our affirmation of faith says,

**God creates and calls us;
Jesus reconciles and redeems us;
the Spirit energizes and empowers us
for worship, love and service.**

So we believe that God calls each and every one of us. God wants to have a personal relationship with us, to know us more so that in turn we can come to know God more. But how are we responding to God's call?

Several thoughts here:

1. No response is indeed a response. It may be a somewhat unconscious response, but still none the less a response. When it comes to God's call it seems that we would want to be more intentional, to be more open to where God is leading us.
2. Are we really open to God's call, are we willing to be transformed? Sometimes, I think no, we are not. Or, rather I should say, no I'm not.

On the one hand, I am. I've always tried to love and serve the Lord with all my heart, mind, and strength; sometimes more intentionally than others, but I'm human, I'm far from perfect. But it's a desire that I seek and with God's abundant grace I can continue to love and serve God and in doing so come to know God more. So on this one hand, I have a deep desire to hear and respond to God's call. Then on the other hand, I'm

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realizing that I'm not fully open to God's word. Or at least I have put limits around how God is allowed to call me or to reveal himself to me. (haha right) I share this with you not because I think you are responding to God in the same way I am, but because this was the clear word of God revealed from Paul's story for me. Maybe in some way it can help you as you think about how you respond to God.

So back to not fully being open to God, to putting limits around God. I have worked really hard for the majority of my life, (and I know some of you out there are chuckling, thinking you're not that old) and I'm just now getting to a point of stability. The past ten years or so have been filled with constant transitions and changes all of which I have fully embraced, but I'm now at a point where I like what I'm doing, where I'm living, the community around me. It's familiar and it's good. I've managed with God's help (and we are really still working on it) to reprioritize my life and to cut out as much of the unnecessary busywork that I often find myself doing so that I can have time to rest with God, to study God's word, to be with my family more. I feel that for this moment I'm growing into a fairly healthy stage in life, in my relationship with God. I'm not ready for that to change. Small changes are okay, because I do still want to grow, but this talk about being transformed; I'm not so sure about that. But even as I say it, it hits me hard because I want to be open to God's call, yet at the same time only if it doesn't mean radical life-changing transformation.

What really drew my attention to this issue of not being fully opened to God's call was my half-hearted even joking response. Occasionally, people have asked probably what seemed like innocent questions to them, "Are you considering such and such." For those questions that I deemed might be too life changing, too transforming, I thought to myself "Yes, I'm praying about it, but God is going to have to knock me upside the head pretty hard before I do that." In other words, I'm going to need a bright light on the Damascus road. I'm going to need a burning bush before I accept even the possibility of that call. Sadly this tells me I'm not being fully open to God's word. God might not even be calling me to do such and such, but in those circumstances I'm not allowing God to reveal God's self to me. I'm limiting God's work in my life. I'm saying no before I have even clearly named or heard the call.

I'm forgetting that Paul's story reveals not only the transforming power of God's call, but God's knack of calling and empowering us for tasks we could have never imagined ourselves doing. This tells me that I need to trust God more, if God is helping me to build a healthy God-centered life, why do I think a transformation will be against that rather than to empower it?

Enough about me, let's turn this to you. God is calling you. God's call for each of us is unique and likewise our response to God's call will be unique and personal. What has been tugging at your heart lately? What have you and God been wrestling with? How are you being called to respond? Are you being fully open to hearing God's word or have you unconsciously put limits around God?

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I encourage you and I pray that you will name the call that you hear from God and be intentional in your response. That might take time, prayer, wrestling with God, and many discerning conversations with family, friends, and others in our Christian community. But by not responding or not being fully open to God's Word, we are rejecting the gifts, the transformation, that God has intended for us. Truly, we can't limit God, but we do limit and place boundaries around how we know and experience God.

May God's transforming power and unconditional love empower us to hear and respond to God's call.

To the Glory of God. Amen.