

“HEARING THE CALL: Called by Chance”

Acts 1:21-26

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Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison WI

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In my previous call I was the Associate Pastor for Children, Youth and Families. Part of that position was leading the summer mission trips with the youth. Tradition dictated that we would always lead youth Sunday the day after we got back from our mission trip, which meant that for a select group of youth, the Friday before we left was dedicated to writing and planning for that Sunday worship. On one particular trip I had a group of awesome seniors who all wanted to write reflections to be slotted into the sermon time. We only had room for two of them to give reflections, but four of them wanted to speak. So I had to figure out how to choose who got to give the reflection. I knew all four of them, and I knew that they would all do excellent jobs, so I gathered them together and we read this scripture passage. Acts 1: 20-26

20 “For it is written in the book of Psalms,

‘Let his homestead become desolate,

and let there be no one to live in it’;

and

‘Let another take his position of overseer.’

21 So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 22 beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.” 23 So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. 24 Then they prayed and said, “Lord, you

know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen 25 to take the place[g] in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." 26 And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

After we read that passage I invited the youth to pray with me. After the prayer we drew straws, and the two who drew the long straw were the ones to give the reflection.

This passage from scripture is, for me, completely bonkers. I come back to this passage often, just because it is so bizarre. For the past few weeks in worship we have been talking about call stories in the Bible. We've heard of Jesus calling the first disciples, telling them that they will become fishers of people. We've heard of God calling to the sleeping Samuel in the temple, and learned of Samuel not understanding that it was God speaking to him. We've heard Jonah's call, and heard of him running in the opposite direction. This week? We're flipping a coin.

In most of the call stories we hear in the Bible we understand God's call as something dramatic. God speaking directly to people – scales falling from Paul's eyes, burning bushes. Not so much in this one. Just a casting of lots. It has always blown my mind that this is how the apostles chose to replace Judas. Presumably, being one of the 12 apostles is a pretty serious task. One that you would think would be decided on with much grave deliberations, maybe a neutral pulpit or extensive interview weekend. You would think that they would take the whole thing a little more seriously than this. While I'd often wondered about this, it wasn't until this past week that I'd taken the time to learn more about the practice of casting lots. Little did I know that this was actually a more common practice that I knew. This was not an uncommon way of making these kinds of decisions in ancient times. The casting of lots was a way of discerning God's will. In the book of Joshua there was controversy on how to divide the lands amongst the tribes of Israel. So Joshua declared "You shall describe the land in seven

divisions and bring the description here to me; and I will cast lots for you here before the Lord our God". In the book of Jonah the sailors cast lots to figure out who's God was mad at whom. According to Jonah "The sailors[a] said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah". That's how they knew who to throw into the sea. If you were a casting director for a movie about the book of Genesis, you would also need to cast Lot.

Casting lots is also a practice in our modern times. I'd like to introduce you to Shelly Simonds and David Yancey. They were running against each other to serve in the Virginia house of delegates. After election day came and went it was determined that the result of the election was a tie. 11,607 votes per candidate. According to Virginia law in the case of a tie that the state election board needs to 'determine by lot which of the candidates shall be declared elected'. So their names were printed on slips of paper. The paper was then put into identical film canisters and the names were drawn out of a very tasteful ceramic bowl. Casting lots as a way of choosing who will govern us.

Which brings us back to Joseph, aka Barsabbas, aka Justus (who I'm just going to call Joseph, because that's a mouthful) and his companion Matthias. The names were entered into the bowl, the drawing was done, and Matthias became one of the 12 apostles.

Do we think Matthias celebrated this 'victory'? Obviously, Matthias knew what was going to happen. He had been travelling with Jesus since the beginning, had watched the Pharisees plot and plan against him, had witnessed the crucifixion. He must have known that this victory took his life in a difficult new direction. People didn't become apostles for the generous retirement package. Not much is known about how most of the apostles died, but there are stories and legends about it. Here is a brief summary of the legends of how the apostles died, from "The Big Book of Martyrs", a graphic novel depicting martyrs throughout Christian

history. First is Andrew, crucified (reportedly he preached for two days while on the cross, but something you will need to worry about), next is Simon and Jude, beheaded. Next we have Thomas, speared and James the lesser who got hit with what is known as a 'fuller club'. This club later became the icon associated with James the lesser, which seems really cruel if you ask me. James the greater, stabbed and Matthew, who died fighting a dragon, which is cool. Believe it or not, John is reputed to have made it all the way to old age. That brings us to Matthias, never mentioned again in the entire Bible, is thought to have been beheaded. This is what Matthias 'won', a lifetime of struggle and persecution, a lifetime of fighting for his beliefs to aid future generations, with no hope of reward during his time on earth. But it was something that he believed in enough to put his name forward. The same is true of Joseph. He knew that should he be chosen that his life would never be the same. He probably also understood that no matter what the outcome, his life would not be easy. Just like Matthias, Joseph is never mentioned again in scripture, but that does not mean he stopped existing after this story. Matthias and Joseph both likely went on to serve God, to minister to the people, to spread the good news, to give comfort to widows and orphans. Both of those men fulfilled the qualifications that Peter laid out. Both of them were, as Peter said, "men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 22 beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us"

Matthias was called to be an apostle because his name was drawn out of a bowl. The random chance, the fate, the divine providence led to Matthias becoming an apostle. Joseph may not have received the call to apostleship. His move towards serving the kingdom may not have looked like he wanted it to. It did not take the form of apostleship, but it almost certainly took the form of discipleship. Despite what was probably a heartbreaking loss when it came to casting lots, I am certain that Joseph did not give up. This man was present at Jesus baptism. He was present through Jesus teaching. He was present at Jesus' crucifixion. If he stuck

with that community through all of that, there's no way he gave up on his faith just because his name didn't come out of the bowl.

While this story from Acts is considered the call story for Matthias, it could just as easily work as the call story for Joseph. It could just as easily work as an example of our own sense of call. The call comes to us in many different ways. For some it can seem like it comes the way it came to Paul, with a miraculous appearance of the risen Jesus. This radical and magical conversion story doesn't come often. In the case of Paul it caused a radical reorientation of his life, from persecuting followers of Christ to becoming their strongest defender. That isn't the way it usually happens though. Joseph and Matthias both lived a life dedicated to following Jesus, and the occasion for their call was not in radical repentance, but in taking up greater responsibility in the lives they were already leading. God's call on our life can often take that form, a call towards taking greater responsibility, a call towards progress along the path already laid out. Often times it can come in ways that are random and unexpected. The question is, how do we listen for that call? For Matthias, the call came clearly and by happenstance. For Joseph, he probably had to search inside himself as to how to respond to what God was asking from him. Every day, God is speaking to us. Every day we see new calls in our lives. This could be in our life of prayer, it could be in paying attention to the world around us, it could be in response to the witness of our neighbor, it could even be in reflecting on a recent setback.

When my youth were all asking to write the reflection, only two of them were able to. Those two youth wrote excellent reflections; deep and moving. I asked the other two; the ones who drew the short straw, to write the affirmation of faith. They were not enthusiastic about that request, but I encouraged them to take it seriously, and to dig in to what it means to affirm our faith as a community. They read from the book of Confessions for reference, they reflected on the conversations we had during the mission trip, referred to Bible verses that we had

discussed in small groups and wrote something that was poignant and powerful. In being told that they were unable to do the thing they wanted, they were given the opportunity to explore a different avenue of worship leadership, one that they had previously not thought of as worthwhile. They answered the call that they were not expecting, that they perhaps did not want, that came to them through chance.

Matthias answered the call as it came to him, as did Joseph. This call is not an easy one, though. In the first century, it meant persecution, poverty, marginalization and death. In the 21st century, we can breathe a little easier. We will not be put to death for coming to church. We will not have to face the persecution and struggle found by the earliest Christians. But doesn't that make it even more important that we let this call infuse our lives? We have been given the privilege and power to use God's call without those attendant fears. Doesn't that make the call that much more urgent? Shouldn't we be able to make the minor sacrifices required from us, in the face of the major sacrifices from our forerunners? In our modern times the sacrifices are less severe, but they are still there. To witness to idolatries in our culture; the gravitational force of money, the poisonous ideology of racism, the distrust and fear of our neighbor. All of these things require strong, firm witness. All of these things can lead to us standing out uncomfortably, can lead to strain in some relationships. God has called each and every one of us to certain ministries. I don't know how the call came in your life. I sometimes have a hard time recognizing where the call came in my life. Regardless, we find ourselves in this place, with these people. Whether we are here because we have been discouraged and are looking for hope, or because we enter with joy and are looking for celebration. Or somewhere in between, or both. We've been called to this place, we've been called in our lives. We need to listen to that call, however it comes to us, and go forth transformed by God speaking to us.