

THE WILD CALL OF GOD

CALL TO WORSHIP (Psalm 145:8-14)

The LORD is gracious and compassionate, long-suffering and ever faithful. The LORD is good to all; his compassion rests upon all his creatures. All your creatures praise you, LORD, and your loyal servants bless you. They talk of the glory of your kingdom and tell of your might, to make known to mankind your mighty deeds, the glorious majesty of your kingdom. Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations. In all his promises the LORD keeps faith, he is unchanging in all his works; the LORD supports all who stumble and raises all who are bowed down.

INVOCATION

Oh Lord, you call us home again. May we stay beside you even as you are beside us. You have hopes. You have dreams for us beyond the leadings of ambition, power, and success. Only your will can satisfy us. Only your love can fill the void. Only your rest can bring us peace. For the food that sustains us, for an unexpected kindness that makes a day, and for new beginnings that bring us back to life, we give thee thanks and praise and glory. May you reign in us forever with your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READING (I Samuel 16:1-13)

The Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve because I have rejected Saul as king of Israel? Fill your horn with oil and take it with you; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem; for I have chosen myself a king from among his sons." Samuel answered, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." "Take a heifer with you," said the LORD; "say you have come to offer a sacrifice to the LORD, and invite Jesse to the sacrifice; then I shall show you what you must do. You are to anoint for me the man whom I indicate to you." Samuel did as the LORD had told him, and went to Bethlehem, where the elders came in haste to meet him, saying, "Why have you come? Is all well?" "All is well," said Samuel; "I have come to sacrifice to the LORD. Purify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." He himself purified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

When they came, and Samuel saw Eliab, he thought, "Surely here, before the LORD, is his anointed king." But the LORD said to him, "Pay no attention to his outward appearance and stature, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not see as a mortal sees; mortals see only appearances but the LORD sees into the heart." Then Jesse called Abinadab and had him pass before Samuel, but he said, "No, the LORD has not chosen this one." Next he presented Shammah, of whom Samuel said, "Nor has the LORD chosen him." Seven of his sons were presented to Samuel by Jesse, but he said, "The LORD has not chosen any of these."

Samuel asked, "Are these all the sons you have?" "There is still the youngest," replied Jesse, "but he is looking after the sheep." Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and fetch him; we will not sit down until he comes." So he sent and fetched him. He was handsome, with ruddy cheeks and bright eyes. The LORD said, "Rise and anoint him: this is the man." Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and the spirit of the LORD came upon David and was with him from that day onwards. Then Samuel set out on his way to Ramah.

THE WILD CALL OF GOD

At certain points, the life of David and the life of Jesus come together. After his anointing, David became a mighty warrior. After His baptism, Jesus became a mighty spiritual warrior. Scripture is more or less silent about both of their childhoods. Before shepherding the people of Israel, David used to shepherd flocks of sheep and defend them against lions and bears. Before becoming shepherd of the church as we know Him today, Jesus watched over His disciples and many followers, defending them from much worse. Saul's son Jonathan was almost as loyal to David as Peter was to Jesus. David had many wives. And Jesus? Well, who do we think *we* are?

The prophet Samuel was to King David what John the Baptist was to Jesus. Both were fierce Old Covenant prophets whose obedience to God's instruction changed the course of Israel's history. When Samuel anointed David and when John baptized Jesus, the Holy Spirit came powerfully upon both kings and soon drove them face to face with their adversaries. Just as Goliath defied Israel morning and evening for forty days before David slew him, so did Satan defy the coming of God's kingdom by tempting Jesus in the wilderness to no avail.

Both men had power over evil spirits. Both kings began their calls outside of incumbent religio-political establishments. Neither of them received their authority and power via the usual channels because those who manned such channels were not being faithful. Saul and his retinue repeatedly tried to kill David, forcing him to live as an outlaw among his own people. Jesus ran into a few similar problems.

But what strikes me most about the lives of David and Jesus is that God chose both of them for Himself and communicated this choice via direct personal experience. They were not zealots. They did not go rogue on their own. They did not act the way they did before God gave them permission. Nothing about their lives after the Spirit came upon them matched anything they could have imagined.

Left to our own wisdom, we would not have chosen David as our king or Jesus as our Messiah. David's own father did not even bother presenting David before Samuel. Nothing qualified them in our eyes according to our expectations for success.

What business did a shepherd boy have trusting that God had anointed him king of Israel when there was already a king? What business did a carpenter's son have believing He was God's beloved Son and Messiah? What business do *we* have accepting God's invitation to receive the Holy Spirit just as much as David and Jesus did?

This is one of the revolutions of the New Covenant. That if we are willing, the Holy Spirit can be as present in our own lives and assignments as He was with them. What an extravagant gift, that God would give Himself to us and dwell in us and, because of this indwelling and inbreaking love, go through everything we go through and feel everything we feel so that we are never again alone in anything that happens to us.

The gift of the Holy Spirit living inside the temple of our bodies means in part that we never have to live another moment wondering if someone else knows what it's like. The coming of the Holy Spirit to each person is the broadening and deepening fulfillment of the Incarnation – that there is nothing you and I have experienced for good or for ill that God has not also somehow experienced. Our wounds are His wounds. Our tears are His tears. What is done to us is done to the God who dwells in us. We are not alone.

The deeper we let this extravagance percolate into our awareness, the stronger will be the attacks and distractions attempting to get us back into striving, earning, and deserving such grace. In the film *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, the main character, Charlie – a high school freshman – asks his favorite teacher, Mr. Anderson, “Why do I and everyone I love pick the people who treat us like we're nothing?” Mr. Anderson replies, “We accept the love we think we deserve.”

But our relationship with God grows in proportion to our willingness to receive a love we do not deserve. How else can both our pride and our abuse be healed? And how can any of our works in a finite world cause us to earn or lose an infinite life? How can any of our behavior cause us to earn or lose every spiritual blessing? We are so conditioned here to being punished when we fail and rewarded when we succeed. What really messes us up is when the world considers us miserably beneath the task, but God blesses us and calls us to something greater anyway. By all of our indicators, that's not how it's supposed to work.

Man is not the measure of all things. We are the measure of the *appearances* of all things. We cannot know on our own what God in His wisdom will do or ask us to do. This world exalts people when they are at their best without God, in part to provide those who say yes to God with every reason to doubt God's power to work through them. Who am I to follow Jesus? How can God's power, which is beyond measure, work through me, as broken and full of weakness as I am?

In the eyes of the world, we will never be good enough to do God's will. But God knows us so much better. Each one of us is His handiwork, His masterpiece, endowed with a particular purpose only we can fulfill. God has a way of calling those whom the world might consider among the least likely to succeed. Like David, we all have our backgrounds, our histories, our sense of nothingness and unworthiness before we received the Holy Spirit. But just because we have not earned such love does not mean we are lacking in our design or in our gifts. Who we really are in Christ is more than enough to do what God asks of us, "not by power, not by might, but by His Spirit." (Zechariah 4:6)

When we begin doing God's will more consciously, some of those who were in our circle when we were less consciously doing our own will often start questioning our decisions and motives. Willingly or unwillingly, the adversary uses them to interrupt our rhythm and foil our inspiration. Someone might begin to notice and point out our flaws more than ever before. Our character and reputation might be attacked. Anything is on the table as long as it makes doing God's will as hard and unattractive to us as possible before the blessing comes – before the breakthrough arrives.

As soon as God's dreams for us and the means to bring them about become somewhat clear to us, what used to be easy and effortless can become difficult and riddled with mistakes. We might be overcome by the sense that we are not enough: Not strong enough. Not wise enough. Not spiritual enough. But you *are* enough. You are fearfully and wonderfully made. You have the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ. You have the God of the universe behind you, whose love for you makes you priceless, beyond the extent of your usefulness in this realm.

Don't be afraid. Don't hold back. Choosing to live in fear is for those who will not let themselves be loved. What do you want *so much* that you are afraid of how much you want it? What is the holy desire that you cannot shake, that keeps coming back to you, that will not stop gently knocking on your door? A great saint once said that God would not inspire the longings we feel unless He wanted to grant them.

I completely relate to David's father Jesse in this story. He presents his sons in the order that he thinks Samuel might choose them, according to their age and therefore their strength, experience, and education. Then he has to endure the embarrassment of causing everyone to sit and wait until his youngest son David arrives.

Have you ever presented all of your best ideas before God, only to have Him choose the one you completely disregarded at first? Have you ever wanted to follow through on all the options you could think of, only to have God say, "What about this one?" And you ended up having to wait a lot longer for it to come to pass than if you had just prayed first? I certainly have.

I also identify with Samuel. Presented with several choices, I am often tempted to assume that God's will is what appears to make the most logical sense to me. When trying to do God's will, one of the hardest questions to ask must be, "Are these all the sons you have? Is this the whole picture, or am I missing something here, Lord?" I tend to consider a number of good ideas before I realize God's will is out tending the sheep.

In the eyes of God, what exactly qualified David to be king? His heart. Samuel ritually purified Jesse and his sons before the sacrifice. David was not purified, yet Samuel immediately anointed him with oil and the Holy Spirit came powerfully upon him. The Lord spoke to Samuel regarding Jesse's first son: *"Pay no attention to his outward appearance and stature, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not see as mortals see; mortals see only appearances but the LORD sees into the heart."* But what about David's heart?

Jeremiah and Jesus both warned against the wiles of the human heart. Speaking through Jeremiah, God said, *"The heart is deceitful above any other thing, desperately sick; who can fathom it?"* (Jeremiah 17:9) And Jesus agreed: *"But what comes out of the mouth has its origins in the heart; and that is what defiles a person."* (Matthew 15:18-19)

"Follow your heart," "follow your passion" – these are not Christian wisdom. Not unless our hearts have been broken, truly circumcised by what we did to our Savior on a cross, or by something else that communicates this reality to us.

A dear friend of mine from childhood studied abroad in England. He was there while I was doing the same thing in Ireland. He came to visit me in Galway for a long weekend and quickly got along with most

of the other international students. We both sported pea coats at the time, and I'm sure we enjoyed a cigar by the river before he left, waxing on about our adventures, past, present, or to come. I went to see him in Lancaster later in the semester. He would have given me a tour of the whole country, he was so happy to see me.

We had played soccer together since sixth grade, and we played again when I visited him. We actually became closer friends after we graduated from high school than we were before. We had found summer jobs in the same small town in Maine and used to frequent the swimming holes along the Swift River after work.

He called me up late one night. It had been several months since he had returned to the States, and we were both almost finished with our degrees. But he had been in England for over a year and was experiencing a lot of cultural disorientation upon reentry.

He told me over the phone that he wanted to kill himself. I was five hundred miles away. I stayed on the phone with him until someone came and he was safe enough for me to call his parents and our mutual best friend who went to the same school he did. I kept calling until they woke up. Our friend stayed up with him that night and his parents visited in the morning. He's living in China now, teaching English.

It took me two weeks to let myself weep – to let my heart break for him. The shock finally wore off. There was a lull in my schedule. It was Friday. I went for a walk in the fields behind my college campus before dinner when it sunk in that I could have lost him.

The breaking of the heart is not only how the Word of God gets inside of us; it is how the unrelenting pollution of this world gets cleaned out. It is how emotional callousness is healed and the heart of stone removed. There is none among the pure in heart who have not had theirs broken.

What circumcised Jesus' heart enough for God to reconcile us through Him? At such a young age, what broke David's heart enough for God to make such a fine king out of him? We might never know. And I am not sure we need to know. Sometimes scripture is silent on purpose. Here its silence might hint at a universal experience that is, at the same time, too personal, too particular for us to understand until our own hearts break. And when that happens, we know more than a story can tell us.

THE WILD CALL OF GOD

Inasmuch as God has allowed for our hearts to break, He has provided for their healing and the sealing of His Word within them. But we do not have to postpone this experience. Heartbreak is inevitable, but how it first happens to us is not. We need not wait around for the myriad sources of destructive suffering to catch up with us. The best way to have our hearts broken is to ask God to do it first, before anyone else does. Because our hearts can first break one of two ways: from sorrow or from joy, from fear or from letting ourselves be loved too much. The only way God will ever break our hearts is by giving them so much love that they must burst open to receive it. And like David and Jesus, what we receive can strengthen us to face what may come and help us heal from what has already come. What we receive from heartbreak is a precondition necessary for bringing God glory.

COMMUNION

May we hear the ancient call again: *“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”* Our Lord Jesus, forsaking all others, withholds nothing of Himself from us in this meal, that we may become one with the Truth and the Life in an utterly new Way.

“On the night when he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my body, surrendered for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”

Come, Holy Spirit, bless this bread that the earth has given and human hands have made. May it be for all the Bread of Life!
Bless also this cup, may it be for all the Cup of Blessing!

BENEDICTION

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Spirit.