

Sermon—Second Sunday after Epiphany

What's your favorite movie? I can think of many that I really like, many that have spoken to my heart, many that have made me laugh, a few that have changed the way that I view life. But for years now I have put *The Wizard of Oz* at the very top of the list. The themes of home, family, friendship, and trust resonate dearly in my schmaltzy soul. Who hasn't fallen in love with the Cowardly Lion or been fascinated by the view of the Emerald City as seen in the distance from the poppy field or been glad and relieved when Dorothy melts the Wicked Witch? But recently I have been ruminating about another theme of the movie. Calling. The theme of being called. Hearing that invitation or command from **somewhere**, emanating from deep inside as a still small voice or from an exterior, uncertain place. In retrospect one of my favorite scenes in the movie is where Dorothy, just after leaving Munchkin Land, finishes her conversation with the Scarecrow and together they begin skipping and swaggering down the Yellow Brick Road, off to see the Wizard. Can you picture this scene from your memory? The road extends itself in curves and dips, across fields and meadows unobstructed by buildings or vegetation, to the distant horizon. Becoming narrower and narrower, it disappears

where the land and sky meet. Nothing beyond **that** except a promise. Home was calling. **There** was where the merry trio must go. Let's not forget Toto.

So begins **one** journey of faith and response. In our Old Testament reading today, another faith journey was beginning. And as do many of **ours**, the little boy Samuel's was attended by misinterpretation and confusion. He attributed God's voice to something very logical and practical, a person—his mentor Eli—calling for him from the next room. Who among **us** would not have thought the same? But God had something significant in mind for this naïve youth. Samuel was to be the first of the great Hebrew prophets and kingmaker for the united tribes of Israel. God needed Samuel's attention to be able to use **him** for something of tremendous consequence, to be a great leader of his people. Likewise, elsewhere in Scripture, God demanded people's attention in dramatic and frequently unconventional ways. He presented Moses with a nonconsumed burning bush, pharaoh with deadly plagues, the Virgin Mary with pregnancy announced by an angel, Peter with florid visions from heaven, and Paul with blindness, voices from above, and a sore backside on the road to Damascus. And **you** thought you had seen it **all**.

But God does not always choose to be so cataclysmic in his dealings with us. We may not encounter wizards or flying monkeys along the way. Most of the time God tries the more subtle route. In all probability **you** have found this to be

true. That is the case with me. But blindness is not limited to our physical senses. Our stubbornness, denial, and **refusal** can blind us to God's plans. Never-the-less the Holy One knows how to subvert those strategies of ours, trying to win us over by compassion and persistence. That said though, sometimes a call from God **is** difficult to perceive. We attribute **his** gentle nudge to **our** imagination, **our** subconscious, **our** own needs, **our** doubts, **our** fears—not recognizing that God might indeed be trying to reach us through these more mundane routes. Even when we do admit to the possibility of a heavenly origin of a communication with us, we are too ready to repress that notion to respond affirmatively due to a perceived lack of ability, or time, or energy, or confidence. Am I right? We are all full of excuses for why not.

In **my** life I have found that God issues a lot more invitations than commands. He even gives me the right of first refusal knowing that he can come back again when I say no. He would much rather I say, “Here I am, for you called me.” But I do not. I know I have disappointed him.

God's invitations and callings are not just to do, but also to **be**—to fulfill the dream that God had for us at our birth and continues to have for us throughout our life. He is constantly calling us to be our true self, our authentic self, the self that **he** intends—not necessarily the self that **we** intend and are bent on. Do you hear

that calling? Do you envision God's desire for your life that he so desperately wants to share? How do we know of God's subtle signals? How can we be open to his longing for us? **That** sometimes requires being still. "Be still and know that I am God." says the psalmist. *** **That** sometimes requires that we deny ourselves. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." *** **That** sometimes requires that we be more right brained, more intuitive, less analytical. We have to know something by **not knowing** how or why. That is called faith, "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

In many ways perceiving God's call is akin to falling in love. We notice that person who had been previously unknown. For **most** of us it's not love at first sight. But there is something unsettling, maybe intriguing. We can't put our finger on what it **is**, but we find ourselves entertaining new thoughts. We may initially deny the importance of that person for us but we somehow can't get him or her out of our head for very long. Another encounter begets the same or even more fascination. There is a need to explore things further, either mentally or in a face to face meeting. Why is this person on our mind? Of all the things we have to **do** and all the considerations we have **make**, why is **this** notion taking so much of our time? We try to ignore it sometimes—to no avail. It won't leave us alone when

we need to be doing other things. Maybe it even enters our dreams. Other people notice something different about us. They comment about it. We're surprised it's so noticeable. *** We desire to spend more time in that person's presence. No, we **prefer** to spend our time in that way. Is this love? How do we know? It's all so new to us. But it persists. It is relentless. It brings us joy. Then we know. We have fallen in love. We have been called.

Your next calling may not be so consuming or consequential. God's desire for you at this time may be to continue to do what you are doing. But how do you know? Have you asked him? Have you made yourself available to God through prayer, or study, or service to others? Have you rejected his nudges--the thoughts and ideas that he puts into your head or his plucking at your heartstrings? Have you dismissed the counsel of your family, or friends, or a mentor who see new possibilities in your life? Won't you let them be as Christ for you?

We tend to think of God calling the individual, but what about a collective, a nation, a community, a foundation or civic group, a church? Might God be calling our parish, St. John's, to something new? He certainly has in the past. One of the most recent has been to refurbish our magnificent organ and historic and beautiful nave and chancel. We find ourselves temporarily in this holy space as a consequence. It's a pretty wonderful alternative, isn't it? But what does God

intend for us when we move back, when we reach the Emerald City? What will we **do** and who will we **be** when we get there? Might God be calling us to more than just a celebration of arrival? There is no doubt that individually and collectively we will benefit from the spiritual uplift we will gain from worshipping in a more functional, a more welcoming, and a more acoustically alive place. The organ will sing in fulfillment of its potential and promise. We will be proud inheritors of a renovated and improved building that was bequeathed to us by our ancestors. But what **else** lies over the horizon where currently the road narrows and disappears? How do we use our fortune to further God's kingdom among those who may never enter through our doors? Are we listening? Do we feel God moving in our communal life? Are we responding to his nudges? Are we in love yet?

Here I am, for you called me.

Here we are, for you called us. AMEN