***Career vs. Vocation***

*a sermon by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno January 26, 2025*

*based on Luke 4: 14-21*

In today’s text, Jesus has turned thirty. A former carpenter, he has begun a second career as a teacher. Did you ever make a vocational change? When did it happen? As I said, Jesus was thirty. Think back to when you turned thirty (unless, you’re, you know, nineteen). Here are a couple of true first person stories to set the background for us”

A woman from Los Angeles writes*: I had wanted to greet thirty at the door of my very own house, wearing a sleeveless linen dress and holding a glass of pinot noir. “Please, come in,” I’d say, and smile warmly. “I’ve been expecting you.”*

*Thirty and I would glide across my pristine hardwood floors, sit down on the couch, and laugh together over the worst parts of my life. As we rehashed each devastating incident, all the pain would miraculously be gone, replaced by a calm acceptance and quiet thankfulness. “I’m glad all that’s behind me,” I would say, pouring myself another glass of wine.*

*I turn thirty in a few months. The reality is: I rent an apartment. I look awful in dresses, and until I lose thirty pounds, sleeves are an absolute necessity. My hardwood floors are scarred and spotted with suspicious dark patches. Sometimes I take photos of the patches, to make sure they aren’t getting bigger.*

*I have no master plan. I worry. I get depressed. I am anxious much of the time. I wish I could earn a living and still manage to exercise, eat vegetables, be creative, practice yoga, meditate, volunteer, socialize, relax. At the very least, I’d like to be able to get up when my alarm goes off. Why do I drink so much, when it gives me such bad headaches? When am I finally going to switch careers? Why, after I’ve spent so many years in therapy, can one call from my mother send me into a weeklong depression?*

If you can relate to that last part, remember that in the gospel of John, Jesus’s ministry begins with a misunderstanding with his mother over a wine shortage at someone’s wedding.

Here’s a second story: Dennis Donoghue of Rowley, Massachusetts, age, 30 writes*:*

*I’d had It with teaching. I worked [in special education, very difficult] and was never sure how much I’d accomplished. I wanted a physical job where I could see the fruits of my labor and wouldn’t bring the work home with me.*

*So I took a job delivering packages. I wore a brown uniform and carried a clipboard. At first I enjoyed the work, especially returning at the end of the day with an empty truck. But then my supervisor began to time me, insisting I drive faster and deliver more packages. I also realized that most of the packages contained junk that people would be better off without. I began to miss teaching in particular the look on a kid’s face when he or she finally figured out how to divide fractions or walk away from a fight.*

*One day I delivered several boxes of textbooks to a junior high school. I was standing at the principal’s desk with my clipboard, waiting for him to get off the phone. “Where in God’s name,” he said into the receiver, “am I going to find a certified special-education teacher two months into the school year?”*

*I gave him his answer.*

So, again, Jesus has changed vocations when we meet him this morning in Luke’s gospel. He’s been out teaching. It’s difficult but things have gone well for him. Everyone is elated with his teaching. There’s just something charismatic about him.

Then he comes back home to Nazareth – to the synagogue there. And he stood up to read;

*and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written,*

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed,*

*to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."*

*And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.*

*And he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

He is saying, “Look, this is my vocation. I found it, and I’m 30 years old.” Now, thirty is old in the ancient world. In today’s world a young person can go to med school, do an internship, have her residency and begin a long practice at the age of 30.

Mark’s gospel says Jesus was a carpenter in his first go-round. As I mentioned in a recent sermon, the Greek word there is not the same as someone who makes dining room sets or coffee tables. This is somebody who works in construction.

Perhaps he helped out on building projects in the Roman town of Sepphoris, just a hop and skip from Nazareth. That’s where the money was going in his day.

Construction may have been his career, but preaching, he is saying, is his calling.

It’s interesting to note that the root of the words car and career both come from the same Latin word, carrera, meaning "race track." Kind of revealing is it not? The word vocation on the other hand, comes from the Latin word *vocare,* meaning "to call."  A vocation is a calling.

Where a career demands intelligence to learn a skill, to learn how to get from here to there, a calling, by contrast, demands a certain amount of inner quiet.

It's about listening to a voice within.  This often manifested itself as questions we ask ourselves, quite naturally.

"Is what I am doing really worth all the trouble? Why do I bother? What difference will it all make?"

Calls are seldom loud resounding summons from the heavens: a divine subpoena.  They are instead quiet reminders; often they are recognizable visitations-- we sense them in serendipity, a line from a movie that comes back to us for weeks, or a paragraph from a book that says, " Hello?"

T.S.  Eliot has written, our lives are "measured out in coffee spoons." These serendipitous visitations come coffee spoon sized, mostly.  We sense we need to reconnect with someone, a former teacher, dead or living, an old friend, a wise aunt.  We decide to pick up an old book we haven't touched in years but we know it is important, though not exactly why.  We look at a class catalogue.  These are all minor fire drills that are about larger calls.

Wallace Stevens once wrote, "I don't ask for the full ringing of the bell."  I don’t ask for a clap of thunder that would rend the veil in the temple.  A scrawny cry will do, from far off there among the willows and the cat-tails, from far off there among the galaxies."

Calls are essentially questions.  They are not questions that you need to answer outright.  They ask us merely to entertain them.  Sup with them.  Acknowledge them.

In fact, you don’t want an answer you will just put in a box a store on the shelf of memory.  You want a question that will become a chariot to carry you across the breadth of your life, a question that will offer you a life-time of pondering, that will lead you toward what you need to know for the preservation of your sense of yourself.

Greg Levov wrote a book called, *Callings.* He says that there are two essential questions for us to ask ourselves in this regard: 1) What is right for me?

And, 2) where am I willing to be led?

I happen to believe that discernment demands that we ask these two questions continually and devotedly. That way providence will manifest itself enough times so that the answers will eventually find us.

In sculpting stone, sculptors continually test the stone by tapping on it.  If the tone becomes dull you sense a fault in the area in which you are working, which demands imagination lest you make it crack.  A clear ring, one that hangs in the air, means it is true, has integrity and will hold up to repeated blows.  This is what we are looking for when we are tapping on our lives.

It takes devotion; lots of tapping; lots of questions:

If you are bored with your work today, does it mean you need to leave it or change it? If you don’t get the job you were looking for, does it mean you weren't meant to pursue that career or, as with the teacher who drove for a while for UPS, is it a test of your resolve, or maybe just a kind of sabbatical?

Two decades ago I was given a generous summer sabbatical. I received a grant from the Louisville Institute to study the lives of two poets who were not academics. Most are. These two were professionals in medicine and ministry.

One was William Carlos Williams, a physician. I interviewed a friend of his and learned that Williams got just the fodder he needed to write his poems by making house calls on his patients. It was how he got the energy to stay in the medical profession well into his 70s because every night at 10pm he wound-down by writing about his day.

His work as a doctor gave him the insight necessary to write his poems and the poetry gave him the energy and the meaning he needed to go back out and take care of his patients.

Then I took my family to Wales in the United Kingdom to look closely at the life of a dead poet there named R.S. Thomas who had been an Anglican priest.

Here was a man who served a church on the Welsh/English border for twelve years and then moved into the heart of Welsh-speaking Wales in his mid-thirties because he wanted to learn the old native language his parents had been too ashamed of to teach him.

At first he thought he’d moved to paradise but ended up terribly unhappy. The church was run by retired British military who insisted on being called Major and Colonel; that kind of thing.

He coped for years by writing poetry about the rural people who had been in his former parish. He even became quite famous doing it. Then, in his 12th year there, he reached a breaking point. He didn’t go to work for UPS, instead he went into the city next door to him and bought gallons and gallons of black paint.

His wife was equally unhappy there. Together they spent two days painting the beautiful oak pews in the sanctuary a flat black. Since the church was used only on Sundays, he did it with no interruption. And without permission from that church’s “Surroundings Committee,” either.

When Sunday rolled around his congregants came in, their mouths hanging open. He stood there in his robe and vestments and said, “This is how it feels to be your rector.” Well that was the end of their stay there.

They moved to the only parish that would take him, a little out of the way parish at the end of the Lynn peninsula that had had no priest for a decade. There he became involved in the nuclear freeze movement. It was a good move for him, but he didn’t need to be so self-destructive about it. Well, we all operate our own way.

Sometimes we have psychic agendas that we hide even from ourselves.  We find out that what we were pursuing was not pursued for itself but because we wanted to prove something -- to ourselves, to our parents, whatever. When we sense that we are doing something for the wrong reason there comes, hopefully, the opportunity to get out of it.   This is not an easy business, but it can be critical for us.

I remember being in Eugene some years ago at an upscale wine and cheese shop downstairs in the 5th Street Market.  Two obviously old acquaintances were in rapt discussion.  The man, obviously the owner of the place, stood there cradling a wheel of some kind of cheese.

The conversation was clearly winding up when his friend said to him, "Tell me again how good it feels to NOT be working in mental health any longer." That said it all.  Here was someone who’d set himself free, doing something relatively uncomplicated; and she, his friend, was, apparently, still up to her eyeballs in social services.

But I wonder if he’s still selling cheese now, or has found a new way to say yes to the part of him that went into the helping profession decades before.

*18:* "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed,

*19:* to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

*20:* And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

*21:* And he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus, the carpenter turned teacher, is telling us that the call comes in the act of doing it. You try something out and see how it unfolds.

Many times people experience a voice within that calls them to go deeper into a place they already are.  There they hope to receive what I believe we all long for: the *call within the call* -- the thing within the wider context that fits precisely with who we are. The place where we wake up and see why things have worked out as they have to get us to this pregnant present moment with our special expertise to answer the door when opportunity knocks.

Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde preached a sermon this last Tuesday at our National Cathedral. Part of it has gone viral. She spoke for many of us here at Southminster when, at the end of her sermon, she spoke directly, eye to eye, with our new president.

The reaction she got surprised her. Quoting Jesus about giving mercy to the frightened and marginalized, she expected that conservatives, who claim to know their Bibles, would nod silently and approve, remembering that Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful;” remembering also that Jesus always looked out for those who were in danger.

She also said that she was very worried that liberals would give her an earful for being too soft with the man in charge.

The exact opposite happened. FOX News called her “Satan.” Satan, for quoting Jesus on mercy. A Republican member of congress called for her to be deported. She’s a lifelong citizen of our nation, for goddsake.

There were also threats of violence from the right. When her friends reached out to her to ask if she was okay, she answered them this way. She said, “The people who are in danger are the people who fear for their lives and their livelihoods,” she said. “That’s where the focus should be.”

To those who were shocked by her remarks, Bishop Budde was incredulous. She said, “This is nothing new.” She said, “I’ve been saying this stuff about justice and mercy for the poor and forgotten for decades.”

I get that. It’s the call within her call that she responded to when she showed the spine she showed and spoke up for all of us who fear for our LGBTQ friends and family; and when she spoke up for the millions of tax paying undocumented, hard-working Americans, the backs of which our great economy rides on and, if you’ve noticed, it’s the strongest economy in the world.

Many people who haven’t darkened the door of a church in decades said they loved her courage. Her remarks, they said, are making them think about coming back. Who knew that the church could be so relevant?

Let me close this with a quote from a sermon Bishop Budde gave four years ago on zoom during the height of the Covid epidemic. It was delivered at Howard University in Washington D.C..

These are her words:

*The title of this sermon is: “Decisive Moments in Life and Faith: How We Learn to Be Brave.”  Some people, I suppose, are born brave. Most of us must learn to be brave. We all want to be brave when it counts, to be the one who steps up, leans in, does the right thing when it matters most. We want to bring our best when we’re called upon, to speak with clarity and conviction in a pivotal situation. But how do we become that person, so that when the moments come, we are ready?*

That says it all.

Amen