**Preaching Notes for the First Sunday After Christmas Day, Year C (December 27, 2015)**

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[**Luke 2:41-52**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=102#gospel_reading)

How old were you when you first began to sense God calling you into ministry? What happened that made you feel drawn to serve in a religious profession? How did you respond?

I ask these questions to stimulate you, the preachers who read my words, to think about how, when, and where God called you. But even as I ask us preachers to recall our stories of God’s call on our lives, I remind us that just as God called us, so has God called every person in our congregations to be disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

I can well remember the first stirrings of my own call. My brother Wib would say it started when, at the age of six or seven, I papered the walls of my room with Scriptures and prayers written in crayon in my first-grade handwriting in order to help me memorize The Lord’s Prayer, the 23rd Psalm, and The Apostles Creed. Wib says that was when he first realized there was “something wrong with me.”

I would say I first felt God’s call on my life when I was elected to the executive committee of the North Arkansas Conference Council on Youth Ministries at the age of seventeen. At least that’s the first time it entered my consciousness that perhaps one day I would be an ordained minister. At the time, I didn’t have the words to even describe what I felt; but I remember the feeling.

My call began simply, with a desire to know more about God, and to be in closer relationship with Christ. Maybe it began when I made a conscious decision to enter the candidacy process and go to seminary. Maybe it began the first time I set foot in a sanctuary on my own volition. Maybe it began when I had those feelings at the age of seventeen. Maybe it began when I wrote out all those words and hung them around my room where I could see them. Maybe it began when my mother taught me to pray every night before going to sleep. Maybe it began when my mother and father presented me for Christian baptism at the age of two months. Maybe it began when God knit me together in my mother’s womb.

When did Jesus begin to realize that he was set apart and chosen by God to be the Messiah? Was it when his mother became pregnant by the Holy Spirit? Was it when his parents presented him at the Temple? Was it when Simeon and Anna recognized God’s very Spirit in him? Was it when he lingered behind in Jerusalem to ask questions for three days after his visit to the holy city for Passover at the age of twelve? What it when he was baptized and the heavens opened up and a dove descended and alighted on him and the voice of God was heard declaring, “this is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased?” (Matthew 3:17). Was it when he opened his public ministry by declaring “’The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him” (Luke 4:18-20 NRSV).

Whenever and however it happened for Jesus, it must have in some ways been like it is for all of us. It must have been a gradual realization over time, brought about by a combination of gentle nudges, enlightening conversations, and radical reactions to the world we all inhabit and the role our divine creator God plays in it all. But in other ways, it must have been completely different. After all, none of us is the Messiah, the son of the living God, the one whom we call Christ.

The Scriptures do not tell us much about Jesus between the time of his birth and the start of his public ministry. And in fact, there are very few stories about the young Jesus in the Bible at all. They are all read in worship on the First Sunday in Christmas. One year we read the story of Mary and Joseph’s presentation of their son at the Temple and the unusual responses it brings from Simeon and Anna. The next year we read about the holy family fleeing to Egypt to escape genocide. And in Year C we read about Jesus’ decision to stay behind for a few days in Jerusalem to get to know his God a little better.

Even when we do get a glimpse of Jesus as a young man, Luke doesn’t go into much detail. He simply says that Jesus was “increasing in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor” (Luke 2:52 NRSV).

But isn’t that precisely the where journey of Jesus departs radically from ours? All human beings increase in wisdom and in years, but not all of us increase in divine and human favor. Not one of us has increased in divine favor in the way that Jesus did. Jesus increased in divine favor so much that when his disciples tried to describe what it was like being with him, the only words that would suffice were to say that being with Jesus was so holy and so profound that for them it was the same as being in the presence of God! They could not differentiate, and so they began to use divine language to speak of their teacher, their rabbi, the one they called their messiah and Lord.

Certainly, Jesus must have known himself to be fully human; but did he know he was fully divine? Some passages of Scripture suggest he had an awareness of his own divinity. Could this be the reason that he wanted to stay behind and linger in the Temple for a while? Was it because it felt more like home to him than the home he shared with his earthly parents?

Whether or not that was the experience of Jesus we cannot know. All we can know is what Luke records of the incident, and Luke doesn’t give us any insight into the reasons behind Jesus’ choice. We don’t know how he felt about his understanding of his call. But maybe it doesn’t matter because in the end, Jesus’ own self-awareness about his divinity is less important than the perception of his divinity by others.

When we talk about being called to the ministry in the United Methodist Church we follow the model provided in our Scriptures. Candidates must recognize an inner calling. That inner calling must be affirmed by the perception of others. Perhaps this is why I point to my service on the North Arkansas Conference Council on Youth Ministries as the first identifiable part of my own journey into ministry—because my inner feelings were affirmed and empowered by the perception of others.

The same model that we use to affirm professional ministry applies to those who live out God’s call on their lives as laity. In the United Methodist Church we affirm the ministry of all believers. That means that we believe God calls every person to live out his or her faith in a particular way. Some people live out God’s call through serving in the choir. Others teach Sunday school. Still others find an expression of their discipleship by providing social witness, or serving the homeless, or changing the light bulbs in the sanctuary. There is much work to be done and every man, woman, and child is needed to build God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

As you prepare to begin a new calendar year as a church community, how do you plan to affirm and empower the ministry of the people in your congregation?

[**1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=102#hebrew_reading)

This summer I had the opportunity to join my colleague Dr. Steve Manskar and nearly forty participants for a Wesley pilgrimage in England. (To learn more

about this annual event sponsored by Discipleship Ministries and the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, see <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/wesley-pilgrimage-in-england>). One of the places we visited was the Wesley childhood home at the rectory in Epworth. The original house burned down, but was rebuilt by Samuel Wesley and today is a museum. We saw the very room from which, on February 9, 1709, five-year-old John was lifted out of the second story window by a man standing on top of another man’s shoulders just as the roof was about to collapse from a fire. John Telford described the impact the rescue had on John and his family this way:

When John was brought to his father by the brave men who had rescued him the Rector cried out, “Come, neighbours, let us kneel down; let us give thanks to God ! He has given me all my eight children; let the house go; I am rich enough.” Nothing was saved. In about fifteen minutes the building, with all its furniture, books, and papers, was utterly destroyed. John Wesley’s wonderful escape always filled him with gratitude. In one of his early prints a house in flames is represented below his own portrait, with the words, “Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire” One interesting reference to the event is found in his journals. On Friday, February 9th, 1750, whilst holding a watchnight service in his West Street Chapel, London, “About eleven o’clock,” he says, “it came into my mind, that this was the very day and hour in which, forty years ago, I was taken out of the flames. I stopped, and gave a short account of that wonderful providence. The voice of praise and thanksgiving went up on high, and great was our rejoicing before the Lord.” Both he and the Methodist people knew by that time for what blessed work he had been spared.
(from The Life of John Wesley by John Telford - Chapter 2, *Wesley Center Online*, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/?id=84>

Hannah prayed fervently to God to bless her with a child (see my [notes on the circumstances of Hannah’s prayer](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/preaching-notes-for-the-twenty-fifth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-b#notes1)). When she gave birth to Samuel, she offered him back for service to God in grateful response. Samuel grew in favor with the Lord and with the people because he committed himself first and foremost to serving God. Over time, Samuel grew to be a great prophet and leader who saw the nation of Israel through a time of enormous transition.

Inspired and gifted leaders like Samuel and John Wesley live into their purpose in life because they put their whole trust in God and God’s guidance. The key to their ability lies not in their own self-assurance and personal charisma, but in their clarity of purpose that is rooted in an unyielding faithfulness to God. They are not “self-made men.” They are God-made people, and the blessed work they are created to do is not of their own making, but from God.

It is always difficult to put our trust in God first. The world tells us that our greatest potential for success comes through ingenuity and hard work. In the American dream, anyone can “pull themselves up by their own bootstraps” if they just try hard enough. The problem with this way of thinking is that it puts the impetus to succeed entirely in the hands of people. There is no sense of success as being about living more and more fully into God’s will for your life.

As we prepare to start a new calendar year, perhaps it is a good time to be reminded that we need to put our trust in God first. One great way to do this is to include as part of your worship on this day the Wesleyan Covenant Renewal Service (*BOW #288*).

[**Colossians 3:12-17**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=102#epistle_reading)

My recommendation would be to offer this blessing as the sending forth or benediction for the service.