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LEARNING CHURCH

Listening for God's Call: Discipleship and Ministry

Susan H. Jones



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God's Call in the Bible

Introduction

This chapter begins by listening to the ways in which ordinary Christian people express their experience of 'call' and then sets this experience in conversation with the rich tradition of call in Scripture. Old Testament models of call draw on the accounts of Abraham, Shiphrah and Puah, Moses, Samuel and David. New Testament models of call draw on the accounts of Simon Peter and Andrew, Mary and Martha and Paul. Attention is given to those passages of Scripture that highlight God's call to each individual. The chapter is designed to help us identify the biblical roots for our own sense of call and vocation.

Introducing Alison and John

Alison and John are discussing their call to follow God. For Alison that call began over 40 years ago when she was a young woman. Alison had been brought up in the Church. She was baptized as a baby and had attended church schools, both primary and secondary. Religion was very much part of her life. In her teenage years the Church's influence dwindled and Alison left the Church. It was not until Alison was in her mid-twenties that she felt a gap in her life and heard the call of God to attend church once again and to follow Christ. There was no dramatic conversion, but a sense of coming home, a feeling that God had been guiding her life, even in the years when she felt abandoned by the institutional Church. This journey of call is still ongoing, as Alison continues to discern God's path for her in the

quiet contemplative prayer life that is so much a part of her spiritual journey to God. Alison has come over the years to appreciate worship that is quiet and reflective. She is aware that she likes to be challenged in sermons with the big picture and with deep theological questions. She also likes order and structure in her worship.

John's journey began later in life when he was converted to Christianity as a student at university. John's parents had brought him up to be open to the different religions found in his locality. He had Muslim friends and engaged with them in discussion about God, but was always sceptical. At university, John shared a flat with committed Christians and spent many a night discussing Christianity. It was after one particular discussion that his friends invited him to the local student church. The minister was a young man with a deep personal relationship with Jesus. He encouraged John to be open to the Spirit and to welcome God into his life. After one memorable evening, John's life was transformed as he welcomed Jesus into his life. He was baptized and became an ardent and powerful speaker for Christianity and for the Church at university; and he has continued this zeal into his working life. Now John feels called by God to work among the homeless, which is so much part of his active and engaging spiritual life, evidenced by doing and helping others. John is happiest when worship is engaging and when people sing and pray together. He likes to feel through worship and sermons that all are loved and cared for by God. He is keen to make people feel welcomed and to attend to people's needs. But most of all he likes worship to be flexible and open to the Spirit.

TO DO

Draw a diagram or note down:

- your earliest experiences of God;
- key moments as you have grown in faith;
- where you are now.

In what ways have you felt a sense of being called by God to something, or observed a sense of call in someone else?

The call of Abraham

In Genesis 17.1–7 we hear of God's encounter with Abram. Abram is a very old man, a man without much of a future, a geriatric with few prospects; but God calls Abram as the person he is and, in calling him, gives him a new name, Abraham.

Like our opening stories, Abraham's call is personal and particular to him, and it is ongoing. In those stories we recognize that God's call is always ongoing; what God calls us to is based on where we have come from, and so our history with God is deeply linked to who we are.

The call of God is thus particular to individual people. Like Abraham, we are named and known by God. In the Old Testament, names express a person's character and destiny. In giving Abram the new name of Abraham, God is telling us that Abraham will be the 'father of nations'.

In calling Abraham, God is entering into a covenant with him. In verse 1 God outlines what he expects of Abraham, 'walk before me, and be blameless'. Abraham is to trust in the promise and adopt a God-centred attitude, sharing in God's eternal promises in the world. As part of the covenant, God will give him land and children, for Abraham had neither at the time when God called him. In this call, we hear that it is God who takes the initiative; God comes to Abraham and speaks to him. What is clear is that God is the initiator of the covenant. Abraham's response is to fall on his face before the living God and laugh (verse 3). He laughs, and so does Sarah later when she is told she is to have a child. The laughter may be at the improbability of what God is offering them.

Abraham's vocation can only be fulfilled if he has humility and a willingness to listen. Our opening stories suggest it is no different for us.

TO DO

Abraham's encounter with God is told in Genesis 17, but this is a continuation of a calling begun much earlier.

- Read Genesis 12.1–4.
- What does Abraham have to do to respond to God's call?
- Now read how Abraham responds to God in Genesis 15.2–3. How is his response different?

The call of Shiphrah and Puah

At the beginning of the book of Exodus (Exodus 1.15) we hear about the call of two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. For these women, the call of God is heard within the context of their everyday working lives; not unlike John in our opening story who felt called to work with the homeless.

As midwives, Shiphrah's and Puah's vocation is to work in co-operation with the God who brings new life into being. Their calling, like John's, is to a loving, creative, serving work. When faced with a king intending to kill all the descendants of Jacob, these two women stand by their belief in and their fear of God. They refuse to obey the king and they continue their work. There is no sense that God has intervened directly, but what we see is two women listening to the call of God in their daily lives and responding accordingly.

These women do what they can, with the resources they have and the gifts that God has given them, in the situation in which they find themselves. Although these women are not well-known members of society, leaders or policymakers, they have a profound effect on the future of their people. Their faith is seen in their actions, as a consequence of which Moses is spared at birth.

Alison and John are trying to respond to the call of God in the situations in which they find themselves. They are not well-known members of society, but ordinary people like Shiphrah and Puah.

TO DO

Reread the story from Exodus 1.15–21. In what ways do the actions of Shiprah and Puah connect with God's purpose?

In pursuing their calling, Shiprah and Puah engaged in an act of political disobedience. Can you think of more recent examples in which a person/people may be forced into acts of disobedience in order to be true to their calling, like John in our opening story?

The call of Moses

In Exodus 3 we read about the call of Moses who had been saved by the midwives. The call of Moses is once again personal and particular to him. Moses is called from something to something. He is called from his life as a shepherd to bring freedom to the people of Israel, but once again God's call comes while he is doing his ordinary work.

God calls Moses with all of his past history and experience. His past includes education as an Egyptian and his experience of caring for sheep. He has learned from his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and from his own experience as husband and father. God uses these experiences, as well as Moses' experience as an escaped murderer, to lead the people of Israel to freedom. Moses was a reluctant leader and, as the call of God progresses, he offers more and more objections. But God responds each time, until Moses obeys God's call. For many, including the call of John in our opening story, hearing God's call is no immediate guarantee of following God. Excuses are made and unworthiness is protested, but in the end Moses and others agree.

Moses' call was not in isolation; it is set within the context of other people's call from God, the call for freedom. Pharaoh's daughter was called and played her part; likewise many others heard the call and responded. This call for liberation is still being heard, and John's

call to work with the homeless could well be seen as a call from God to liberate the poor.

TO DO

Moses was called to liberate his people from oppression. Reflecting on this call, can you think of others who have been called to liberate people from oppression? Were any of them reluctant leaders?

The call of Samuel

In 1 Samuel 3, we read about the call of the boy Samuel. Samuel, we are told, was ministering to the Lord under Eli. It is not Samuel who recognizes the call of God, but Eli. The scene is set at night. Eli, old and with poor eyesight, is in his room. The young Samuel is lying in the sanctuary where the ark of Yahweh was resting. Despite the 'quaintness' of this story, it is actually concerned with political power. The writer gives us clues as to the direction the narrative will take. Although Eli cannot see well, he will eventually 'see' who is calling Samuel and point to Yahweh's part in it.

Eli is a model of ministry. Even though we know his family is condemned, and Eli himself seems powerless to do anything, he is wise enough in the faith to direct the young Samuel to the point where he can 'hear' what Yahweh has to say to him.

Moreover, Eli has the courage to hear that word from the lad, even though it is critical of his own interests. He is a model of self-effacement, as he seeks to discern the way of the Lord in his troubled world. In a politically charged and uncertain society, it is in the innocence of a young lad, the wisdom of an old man willing to yield his part in affairs, and the joyous song of a young mother (1 Samuel 2.1–10) that we hear of the way of the Lord and God's call upon these people.

Listening for God's Call

In our opening story, it was the friends of John who heard the call of God for him. It was his fellow housemates who took the time to answer John's questions of faith, to guide him towards God and to help him respond to God's call.

TO DO

Reflecting on the call of Samuel, can you think of a modern-day example in which someone is called by God and someone else interpreted that call?

The call of David

In 1 Samuel 16, we read about the calling and anointing of David. God's choice of David was a personal call. The prophet Samuel called all the other sons of Jesse, who were apparently more appropriate candidates for king, but God specifically wanted David. God chose the youngest, the one not considered important enough to be present. God called the 'unconventional David', the one his father Jesse least expected to be the model of Israel's Messiah (Spina, 2001).

David, like Alison and John, did not initially discern the purpose of his calling. David's first public step into obeying the call of God resulted in the defeat of Goliath. It was accomplished by a faith nurtured in secret and through skills gained over the years. In time he became the greatest king of Israel, one whom the prophets saw as an icon for the Messiah. His story, like the stories of Alison and John, will be part of a much bigger story. The story of faith goes far beyond a small and often narrow understanding of God's call. David's story, like the story of Alison and John, is a story of journeying: in David's case from shepherd boy to sovereign king, with many twists and turns and with remarkable skills developed on the way. The same is true for Alison and John.

TO DO

David was called by God and anointed to be king, but David's journey of faith did not end there. In 2 Samuel 7.1–17 we hear that God said 'No' to David.

- Why do you think God said 'No' to David?
- What resulted from this no?
- On what sort of journey did God's call take David, and how does David's call reflect our own sense of call?

The call of Simon Peter and Andrew

The call of Simon Peter and Andrew is found in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 4.18–19; Mark 1.16–18; Luke 5.9–10). The Gospels of Matthew and Mark have almost identical stories. The call of the two brothers happens while they are going about their everyday work of fishing; they are casting nets into the sea when Jesus says to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.'

Like the call of Elijah in 1 Kings 19.19–21 and the call of the Old Testament prophets in general where God calls people from their everyday existence (e.g. Amos 7.15), Jesus expresses the divine initiative in calling people to discipleship.

In the time of Jesus, rabbis did not seek out students, but students sought out rabbis. In the story of the calling of Simon Peter and Andrew, as is true in the calling of Alison and John, it is Jesus who takes the initiative. Jesus goes to Simon Peter and Andrew; they do not come to him. He sees them; they do not see him. He speaks to them; they do not speak to him.

The big question down the centuries has been: 'How do people become disciples of Jesus Christ?' Alison and John came to be disciples of Christ in very different ways, but what is clear is that, when the call is heard, people follow.

Listening for God's Call

The story of the call of Simon Peter and Andrew in Matthew's Gospel is trying to answer the question of call. The writer of Matthew answers the question by showing Jesus standing disruptively in our midst and calling us not to admire him or accept his principles, not even to accept him as our personal saviour, but *to follow him*.

A reasonable response to Jesus' command, 'Follow me', would be, 'Where are you going?' The fishermen, like Alison and John, do not know the destination; they must learn it along the way.

Like Alison and John, people become disciples of Christ in different ways: some through dramatic suddenness and some through a slow and painful struggle; others cannot point to a specific call at all, because having been born and bred in the faith they cannot remember a time when they were not believers. For the writer of Matthew's Gospel, there is one common denominator. People become disciples by the power of Jesus' word; they follow because Jesus has spoken to them, and his word generates faith (Boring, 1994).

TO DO

Reflecting on your own call to discipleship, do you think that you have a sense of hearing a call? If so, write down how the 'call to follow' came about for you, and how it has impacted on your own life and those around you.

If you have not experienced anything like this, is it proper to interpret the circumstances and story of your life as a form of 'call'?

The call of Mary and Martha

The story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10.38–42) is the story of two sisters called by God to follow Christ in two very different ways (Francis and Atkins, 2000). Like Alison and John, they are two very different people. Martha is like John in our story; both could be seen as archetypal extroverts. Martha is excited by the arrival of visitors. John is excited to talk about his faith with others. Both enjoy and are occupied with all the social interaction. Martha engages with her visitors and draws energy from them.

Mary, like Alison, is the archetypal introvert. Mary quietly withdraws into herself when the visitors arrive and gets exhausted by the social interaction. What Mary and Alison do is sit at the visitors' feet and become centres of stillness and quiet.

Martha, like John, is called by God as a person who takes notice of the practicalities of hospitality. She prepares the food and caters for the needs of people. On the other hand, Mary, like Alison, is called by God to listen to Jesus. She engages with his vision and asks wide-ranging and wide-reaching questions. Mary looks at the ideas of Jesus and uses her own imagination to see the big picture.

Martha, like John, is called by God to use her concern for the well-being of her guests and to engage with matters of the heart. She is concerned with the feelings of her guests and is keen to make them feel welcome. Mary, like Alison, is called by God to be concerned with matters of the head. She sets her priorities and welcomes the challenge of Jesus' teaching.

Martha, like Alison, is called by God to be the well-organized person, disciplined in her outside world. She needs to plan the supper, and she needs order and routine in her life. Mary, like John, is called by God to be open and flexible. She lets supper take second place so she can listen to Jesus' conversation. Mary and John like their outside world to be flexible and spontaneous.

Both Mary and Martha, like John and Alison, are called to serve Jesus, but in very different ways.

TO DO

Mary and Martha have very different personalities. How well do you think the Church responds to the call of such different people?

In your experience, have you seen evidence of the Church being inclusive of all personality types?

Who do you think the Church values more, Mary or Martha?

The call of Paul

Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus (Acts 9.1–19; 22.3–21; 26.4–23) is often quoted as an example of a sudden dramatic conversion to a faith in Jesus. John in our story had such a conversion, but the conversion of both characters comes from a history of exploring faith. For Paul, what occurred on the Damascus road was a climactic event, a literal conversion in the sense that he was going one way and now found himself going in a different direction (Coggan, 1998). He had been turned around. It was as if he had been running from God, then turned round and found himself face to face with God, who had been calling him with infinite compassion. Somehow, the person of Jesus was central to this change. As Paul was later to write: 'the light which is knowledge of the glory of God' was 'in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Corinthians 4.6).

The journey that Paul travelled was a conversion from one sect of first-century Judaism to another; that is, conversion from a mainline sect (Pharisee), which wished to reinforce Israel's separation from the Gentile world, to a sect that understood Israel's commission as 'a light to the nations' to include the Gentiles.

Like Alison and John, Paul's conversion happens within a faith community that confirms Paul's salvation and safeguards his prophetic vocation. This community is there to support the new

disciple, emphasizing the fact that discipleship is far too demanding for the individual alone (Wall, 2002).

Like Alison, Paul had found peace. He could look into the face of Christ and know that all was well. He did not have to abandon the faith of Judaism; there was continuity with the old faith. What is clear, however, is that Paul began a new journey. That new journey made Paul not only an 'apostle for the Gentiles' (Romans 11.13), but a founder of Christian communities, an interpreter of the Christ-event and the first Christian theologian whose interpretation we have inherited (Fitzmyer, 1993).

Like John, Paul could not keep the revelation of Jesus Christ to himself; he had to tell the good news of Jesus Christ to everyone.

TO DO

Reread all three of the conversion stories of Paul in Acts (Acts 9.1–19; 22.3–21; 26.4–23).

- What are the similarities and the differences?
- Why do you think the differences are there?

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the idea of call in Scripture. It has looked at Old Testament models of call and drawn on the accounts of Abraham, Shiphrah and Puah, Moses, Samuel and David. It has looked at New Testament models of call and drawn on the accounts of Simon Peter and Andrew, Mary and Martha and Paul.

In the Hebrew Scriptures we hear that God calls people into relationship, makes a covenant with them and reminds them to keep that covenant. We hear of people called from within their everyday lives to follow God. They are ordinary people trying to live and work according to the purpose of God. We hear also God calling the whole community, but how far the community responds

Listening for God's Call

depends on whether individuals hear and respond, and encourage others to hear and to respond (Chapman, 2004).

In the New Testament we hear that Jesus calls people. We hear about ordinary fishermen called to leave their nets and to follow. We hear of two women called in different ways to respond to and serve Jesus, as the people whom God made them to be. We hear of conversion and the role of the community in enabling disciples to follow Christ.

The call in Scripture helps us recognize that God calls us from different places, as different people with different skills and gifts. God also calls us with our own particular personal histories, limitations and failings. Our calling is unique and special, and like all Christian discipleship it finds its roots and identity in Jesus. As disciples, as people called by Jesus, we are expected to model our lives on Jesus. In other words, disciples are called to be imitators of Christ (Stephenson, 2004).

Further reading

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