

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania
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Follow in Faith

Well, here it is, the last in my five part sermon series that has taken me eight weeks to complete. The series has been on the subject of Spiritual Growth, a subject identified by a strong majority of respondents to our parish survey in the spring. I have identified what I consider five essential components of anyone's spiritual development. Those five components are: 1) Worship and prayer, both public and private; 2) Learning, especially the regular study of Holy Scripture, as well as other spiritually edifying material; 3) Active engagement in Christian stewardship, including working toward a personal tithe; 4) A commitment to Christian community, meaning a willingness to be held spiritually accountable; and 5) Living out your special calling of ministry, using the gifts God has given you to glorify God and to serve God's people. All but last Sunday's sermon are available on the parish's web page or by request in print.

Our Sunday morning Christian education for all ages will start up again on September 12, the weekend after Labor Day. Our adult education forum this year will be based on these five categories of spiritual growth as a kind of outline for the program year. The specific subject matter will be somewhat up to you. On that first day of the adult forum you are invited to come and bring your own ideas, subjects that you would be interested in learning about and discussing. We will do our best to meet the needs and interests expressed over the next program year. If you are not able to be present on September 12, please submit your ideas/requests to either in person, by phone, or e-mail.

Now, today's sermon is on the subject of finding and living out your special calling in ministry. When I was fifteen, I went to speak to my parish priest, the Rev. Jim Trost. I had something on my mind. It wasn't anything that I felt I could talk about with anyone else. He was happy to see me. When we sat down to talk in his office I began by asking him how and when he decided he wanted to be a priest. His story fascinated me –not because there was a lightning bolt or a voice from heaven, but precisely because of the lack of lightning or other special effects. It was a very mundane experience in his life while serving in army that started him down the road to ordination. I was blown away.

I was so blown away that I told him my story. That was the first time I ever told a living soul my story, but it certainly would not be the last...

It was Christmas Eve. My family was late for church. We couldn't get seats together. So my one brother and I ended up sitting in the front pew, looking directly up at the priest while he preached in the pulpit. I was almost fifteen, and had been thinking a lot lately about what I wanted to do when I grew up. I was either going to be a writer, a chef, or a famous drummer in a rock band. I always liked listening to Father Trost preach. He had a pleasant conversational style, although my father used to say that he would go around the barn a few times before going in. On that particular Christmas Eve I don't remember exactly what he said in his sermon. All I remember is looking up at him and thinking, "I could do that." That was it. It was a simple thought. One that could have easily been dismissed. At the time, I really had no appreciation for what a priest did except that he gave a sermon every week.

The funny thing about that simple thought on a Christmas Eve was that it never really went away once it had occurred to me. It was a thought I would return to again and again over

the years, each time the thought had more clarity and more content. Just over fifteen years later I was ordained to the priesthood in that same church.

When you are in the ordination process you have to tell your story over and over. At first, you tell it hesitantly because you're not sure if other people are going to affirm your call. Then you get really good at telling the story succinctly and with passion and conviction. By the time you are ordained, nothing could be more boring than telling that stupid story one more time.

It may be because I had to think and pray so much about my own sense of call to the priesthood, and had that call tested by so many people, that I really love the wonderful call stories in the Bible. We had a great one today: Jeremiah's call story. God calls Jeremiah telling him that before he was born he had consecrated him a prophet. That's a little intimidating. Jeremiah doesn't quite feel up to it, and he tells God that he is too young, and besides he doesn't really know how to speak. Here's the dramatic part. God touches his mouth and says, "I have put my words in your mouth." That's a great call story. Way better than mine.

There are other great ones. What about Moses? The burning bush? That's pretty impressive. He argues with God too. "Who am I to go to Pharaoh?" Who am I supposed to say sent me? What if they don't believe me? And I am not really very good at public speaking. God tells him that he will be with him, and his brother Aaron will be his mouth. God will give Moses the words to say, Moses will give Aaron the words from God, and Aaron will speak to the people. Great call story.

Isaiah has a vision in the temple where he sees God's glory. The six-winged Seraph swoops down, taking a burning coal from the altar of sacrifice, and touching it to Isaiah's mouth, purifying his unclean lips. God asks, who will go to my people, and Isaiah responds, "Here am I. Send me." Great call story.

Amos. He prophesies in Israel, and Amaziah complains and asks him to go prophesy somewhere else, because he doesn't like what he has to say. To which Amos replies, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'Go prophesy to my people Israel.'" Great call story.

In every one of these cases God calls an ordinary person to do something extraordinary. In every one of these cases the person called doesn't really feel up to the task. That trend continues in the New Testament when Jesus calls the most unlikely people to be his disciples – uneducated fishermen, tax collectors, and Paul who was at the time actively persecuting the followers of Jesus. The Scriptures are full of God calling people who would never get an interview based on their resume. The point is that being called by God isn't that unusual. It isn't something that happened in Biblical times and not anymore. It isn't something that happens only to prophets or apostles or priests. It isn't something that only happens to other people. It happens to you. Are you listening?

Each one of us has been blessed with certain gifts, talents, life experiences, education. We have had people in our lives who have helped us in many ways, helped us to be better at what we do, helped us to be better people. Those relationships, those experiences make us who we are. And who we are is exactly who God needs to be his ministers. The Prayer Book defines the ministers of the church as all the people, both lay and ordained. We are all God's ministers. We all have a ministry to do in God's name.

For everyone who follows Christ it is an imperative that we seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to discern what our particular ministry is. You may not be called to ordained ministry, but that doesn't mean that you are not called to ministry. And ministry may be in the Church or it

may not be. God has given you gifts that are particular to you, and the Holy Spirit activates those gifts to enable you to do ministry to the Glory of God and in service to God's people. You may be called to teach in the Sunday School. Or you may be called to serve on the board of a community organization that helps a lot of people. You may be called to serve as a lector or chalice bearer. Or you may be called to give blood, or volunteer as a big-brother or big-sister.

As a parish we should be about helping each other discern our call to ministry and supporting one another in pursuing that ministry. This is the very heart of following Christ. If you are unclear about what God has called you to, ask yourself what are your gifts. What are you uniquely gifted to do? What interests you? What excites you? What frightens you? Remember, that all those people in the Bible didn't feel competent to do what they had been called to do. It was God who gave them the courage and the ability. It was their faith and willingness to follow that allowed them to fulfill their calling.

Remember also one other Biblical call story: Jonah. God called Jonah and told him to go to Culpeper, and Jonah headed straight for Colonial Beach. No matter how Jonah tried to run away from what God had called him to do, God brought him back in ways that were none too subtle, like having a giant fish swallow him and spew him out on the shore. Perhaps you know what it is like to avoid something that God has called you to do. Sooner or later, God is going to arrange the circumstances of your life in such a way that you will not be able to avoid that call anymore. A friend of mine has called the Holy Spirit the Holy Nag.

Don't think that a call to ministry has to be dramatic or even make for a great story. Remember that for Elijah God was not found in the rock shattering wind, or in the earthquake, or in the fire, but in the sound of sheer silence that followed. Often it is in the silence of our own hearts that God speaks to us. It is there that we are the most open to God and most honest with

ourselves. No matter what state you find yourself in in your life, God is able to use you to help build the kingdom of God. And remember one more thing. Following God's call is not about being successful. It is about being faithful. Success is not up to us, for certainly the challenges we will face are beyond us, but it is up to God to bring about the success of the kingdom. It is up to us simply to follow God's call in faith.

Amen.