



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

---

“Life Calls Us On,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on September 20, 2015

A few minutes ago our choir sang that lovely anthem, “Here I am Lord.” It’s based on Isaiah’s call to become a prophet. God asks, “Whom shall I send?” and Isaiah says, “Here I am. Send me!” (Isaiah 6:8). The image of an eager child in a classroom comes to mind, like Hermione Granger in Harry Potter: “Here I am, call on me!”

This not the usual response. In the Bible, when God calls someone, it’s almost always, “Who, me? You must be mistaken.” When God calls to Moses from out of the burning bush, do you remember what Moses does? He tries to get out of it. His first tactic is to assert modesty and lack of confidence: “Who am I that I should go?” (Exodus 3:11). Then lack of knowledge: “What shall I say to them?” (3:12). After that he worries, “What if they do not listen?” (4:1); and then he protests, “I am slow of speech” (4:10). Finally, Moses pleads with God to let him off the hook: “Please send someone else” (4:13).<sup>1</sup> Do you know what God says, in the face of all this resistance? “I will be with you.”

I love that Moses, a hero of the faith, is so human. When the call comes, the call to stretch and grow, most of us, most of the time, initially resist. “Who, me? I couldn’t. You must be mistaken. Please ask someone else!”

I suspect a call fills us with fear and trembling because we know, on some level, that saying yes is going to shake things up. And most of us like to live with the illusion that we can control things. When I was newly married, a woman I worked with asked, “When are you and Tracey going to have a baby?” She had two children and loved being a mom. I said, “Well, when we’ve been married longer, and when my business is more established, and we are more grown up, maybe then we’ll be ready.” And she laughed and said, “If you wait for everything to be perfect, you’ll never do it.”

If you try to control everything, if you need to know the outcome before you start, then you will never say yes to your call. And you have a calling, perhaps a number of callings over a lifetime, ways you are invited to grow into who you were born to be. Our happy task is to listen for those callings and then try and follow where they lead. Even though we may be filled with fear and trembling along the way.

---

<sup>1</sup> See this essay by Dennis Bratcher, “The Prophetic ‘Call’ Narrative: Commissioning into Service,” available online at <http://www.cvoice.org/prophetcall.html>.

Our worship theme this month is “Vocation and Calling,” and I hope you’ll want to dive deeply into this. I hope we’ll keep this question about calling before us, not just this month, but this year, that we’ll ask ourselves, “Who am I called to be and what I am called to do? And what about this congregation, who are we called to be and what are we called to do in this particular place and time?” Because being who and what you are meant to be, that is more than an afternoon project. It’s the work of a lifetime, and it’s worthy of our attention and devotion, our sweat and tears.

I love that, in the Bible, almost all the stories of callings begin with resistance. “Who, me? You must be mistaken.” That was certainly my experience. I didn’t dream of being a minister. Or of wearing this black dress!

It was more like being drawn and dragged to places I did not plan to go. And once I said yes and started, feeling incredibly blessed for the journey. But it has not been without its times of pain and struggle. At first I resisted my call, and tried to run from it. Tracey wasn’t thrilled about it either, and we struggled with this. Then one day, after I had been in divinity school for about a year, she came home from church and said, “We sang a hymn today that helped me to understand this journey you’re on.” And she repeated those words we just sang:

Wake, now, my vision of ministry clear;  
brighten my pathway with radiance here;  
mingle my calling with all who will share;  
work toward a planet transformed by our care.<sup>2</sup>

That was a moment of grace, and one of many blessings on the way.

So today I ask you, what is your calling? Do you know? And if so, are you following it? How is that going, and what kind of support and companionship do you need? We could break up into groups to do this work. Some of you would focus on discernment, making time and space to hear your particular call.

Some of you have heard the call, you know there’s something tugging at you, but you need some support and encouragement to say yes to it. And some of you are living your call, and you need companions and practices to help you to stay committed and connected for the long haul.

In our fast-paced world, I worry that we are losing the ability to ponder, to discern, to struggle with; so we are less clear about what we should say yes to and what we should say no to. We like easy answers and quick fixes, but any call worthy of the name is not one that you can say an easy yes to. Unless you’re like Isaiah! Most of us are like Moses: “Could you please send someone else?”

Today I commend to you this life of struggle; this practice seeking and searching, of asking, “What is my calling? Am I living the life that is my own?” Living these questions will shake things up, and that’s good. Our Unitarian forebear Ralph Waldo Emerson put it this way: “People wish to be settled,” he said, “but only so far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them.”

---

<sup>2</sup> “Wake, Now, My Senses,” words by Thomas Mikelson, hymn #298 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

This work of discerning your vocation is unsettling work, and it's life-giving, soul-nourishing, world-changing work. Howard Thurman, the 20th century minister and mystic, says you begin if from deep within. He said, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

Oriah Mountain Dreamer says, "I have heard it all my life. A voice calling a name I recognized as my own."<sup>3</sup>

What have you heard calling all your life? Underneath the voices that say you aren't good enough, aren't strong enough, aren't yet ready, isn't there another voice, a quieter but stronger voice, that says, "I am here *for* something. My life is not a mistake or an accident. I have gifts to share, a purpose for being." Can you hear that voice? Can you trust its wisdom?

We could have lots of interesting conversations about where our calls come from, whether they come from God or from deep in our souls or psyches. We could talk for hours about what that word God means. But these conversations, as good as they would be, could distract us from doing the work of hearing and following our call. Does it really matter where that call is coming from? Can we simply affirm that life call us on? And isn't what really matters that we listen for that call, and that we respond?

In my experience, this work of finding one's vocation is not a straight line, not a well-marked highway, but rather, as Mary Oliver describes, a journey into a wild night, the road full of fallen branches and stones. On this path I worried about where I was going and what I would have to leave behind. Then Elaine Prevallet, whose words you heard this morning, came to my aid. "God only calls us to be who we are,"<sup>4</sup> she wrote, and those words saved me. They still do.

You aren't called to deny what you love. You are only called to be who you are, to live more and more deeply into what that means. To accept the gifts and the limitations that come with being you, to let your own light shine.

You might ask, "But isn't this self-centered, all this introspection? What about the needs of the world?" What our world needs is people who have come alive. That's how we will help heal and bless our world. By being who we were born to be.

Of course we should also ask, "What is our calling as a congregation? What are we meant to do in this place and in this time?" We have a history of caring for those in need. Is it time to expand this work? Can we address systemic issues like poverty and homelessness? Can we respond to the pressing needs of our day: the epidemic of drug abuse, the prevalence of violence, growing economic inequality, the new wave of racism and prejudice?

Painfully aware of the deaths of so many black people over the past year, in June our Association's General Assembly voted to support the Black Lives Matter movement. So this

---

<sup>3</sup> Oriah Mountain Dreamer, "The Call," available online at [http://www.oriahmountaindreamer.com/pdf/the\\_call.pdf](http://www.oriahmountaindreamer.com/pdf/the_call.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Elaine M. Prevallet, S.L., "Minding the Call," in the journal *Weavings*.

question now lies before us: how do we respond to that call? How will we engage this issue? Are we ready to affirm that black lives do matter? Not more than other lives, but at least as much, which our society needs to remember these days. Are we ready to give our support to that movement?

There is within us, as individuals and as a community, a deep well of goodness and strength. We are part of a long tradition that reminds us we are called to seek justice and love mercy and walk humbly on this earth. The prophets looked toward a time when peace and justice would reign; they imagined a city where love would prevail. We are builders of that city. Our lives are its building stones.<sup>5</sup>

We each have the gift of this one life. We have been blessed with particular talents and passions and limitations. We have the gift of one another and the Spirit moving in our midst. These gifts come with an expectation, that we will do something with them.

Life calls us on. What do you plan to do about that?

Amen.

---

<sup>5</sup> These images from "Hail the Glorious Golden City," words by Felix Adler, hymn #140 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.