

## *We Are Disciples of What We Pay Attention To (Part 2)*

### 1 Samuel 3:1-18

Last Sunday we marked the anniversary of September 11th. That day changed the shape of the world through many people's eyes. It brought to the surface questions and fears that were mostly hidden before. I read the story of a man who was in New York on that day in 2001. He worked in the World Trade Center. He survived, but years later, he was still troubled; he just couldn't recover his life as it had been before. And so, years after the attack, he finally, desperately, sought out a spiritual advisor. And this is what he told her. His voice still cracked as he told the story, years later.

"I was the last person who got on the last elevator to leave Windows on the World before the plane hit. Someone held the door open for me. I don't know who it was. Later, I remembered things. I remembered the sight of an arm reaching out and holding the elevator door open--for me." He'd been having breakfast that day with a woman from a volunteer organization he was connected with. She asked him to do a job for the organization. He'd said 'no'; he couldn't do it; too busy. As they left the restaurant, he stopped at a couple of tables to talk with people he recognized. And then he and his breakfast companion got in the elevator. And instead of getting off at the 78<sup>th</sup> floor, where his office was, he went all the way down to the lobby with her.

So he wasn't in his office when the plane hit the building. When everyone else in his company was killed. His life was saved because of timing and split-second choices. "I keep thinking there has to be a reason," the man said to the spiritual person he sought out. "Something I'm supposed to do now. Only I don't know what it is."

We haven't all been through the sort of your-life-flashing-before-your-eyes moment that this man had. But by the time we reach adulthood and have finished "growing up", most of us ask, I think, "Am I doing what I should be? What is the meaning, the significance of my life?" I would say that this is the most common question I've heard from adults in all the years I've been a pastor: What does God want me to do? What's the big *purpose* in my life? Is there one? Is there *supposed* to be one?

Most of us know, I think, the experience of reaching something we've been striving for, and the disappointing feeling that even that achievement wasn't the answer to our need—for acceptance, love, *something*, that we thought it was going to be. No one actually cares that you broke all the track records in your high school. You juggle work and home and exercise and volunteer commitments and you make all your Christmas presents by hand, and it turns out they don't give extra credit in this life.

In western culture at least, the search for life's purpose and meaning is the question of our time. At Barnes & Noble, there are aisles of books about finding your purpose. *Whole aisles*. At Amazon, there are virtual aisles. People write books with titles like:

*What On Earth Am I Here For?*

*Life Strategies—Doing What Matters*  
*Awaken the Giant Within*  
*Purpose Awakening: Discover the Epic Idea That Motivated Your Birth*

and my two personal favorite titles:

*A Dog's Purpose* and  
*It's Hard to Make a Difference When You Can't Find Your Keys.*

And then of course, there's *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren, which has sold more than 30 million copies. It is one of the best-selling books of all time—perhaps as much for the promise of the title as for what's inside of it.

Last week in our Centering time, I quoted the 20th century mystic Thomas Merton, who said, “If you want to know who I am, ask me what I think I am living for; and then ask me what *keeps* me from living for the thing I want to live for.”

I think his words are brilliant, amazingly insightful. By pairing those two questions, Merton identified what the real problem is for most of us. It's not that there aren't grand purposes that call to us. A hundred things have spoken to us over our lifetimes, impulses that might have been God's voice calling us to give ourselves away for something bigger than ourselves. Causes, passions, that might make a real difference in the world...or might not.

We're just not sure. Something has kept us from following that call. We couldn't clearly identify the source of the voice, or be sure that it was addressed to us. There are so many other voices that sound clearer: family responsibilities, our jobs, the tugs of practicality, financial security. If it were God speaking, wouldn't there be something that looks—at least sort of—like an angel? Wouldn't a path open up and be filled with light?

What *keeps* you from living for the thing you want to live for? I want to suggest this morning that one of the things that holds us back is just wrong, misleading; a misunderstanding about who God is and how God works with us. I think we expect that if what calls to us is really, really our purpose in life, if the voice that's speaking to us is actually God, a way is supposed to open up—clear, smooth, uncluttered—all the way to the goal.

Maybe this is just me, and you can't identify at all with what I'm saying. If that's true, feel free to go on composing your own sermon in your head. I know my experience is not everyone's. But here's a pattern that has occurred many times in my life. Something stirs me to passion about an issue of justice. Gun violence, or racial equality, or human trafficking. Welcoming refugees. Hunger. Homelessness. For a little while, I think this is one of the most critical issues of our time, something I have to get involved in repairing. I get kind of excited—maybe this is God calling me to something that will make a difference!

But then the obstacles begin to occur to me, and to pile up. I have a day job. Family members who need me. Other things I've already volunteered for. What am I thinking? Aren't those enough? You know the litany. I bet it plays in your head too. And whether I make the decision consciously or not, you know what I do? Nothing.

But you know what I think is actually holding me back from following what might be the voice of God in my life? The work seems too hard. It might not succeed. I don't see a clear, unbroken path from here to the goal. I don't have an answer, the solution to a big problem. So, I tell myself, maybe it's not my calling. If this were God speaking to me, wouldn't the way look clearer?

I think there's something in the story of Samuel's calling that is truer than my internal conversation about what God might be saying to me. When God finally got Samuel's attention in this story, God said, "I am about to do something that will make both of your ears tingle." Oh, good! we think—and maybe Samuel too. A way will open up. The Red Sea will part again. It will be smooth sailing to whatever really good thing God has in mind here.

But what's the next thing that God says? Does God give Samuel a vision of glory and clear instructions about how to become a hero?

No. In fact, the vision Samuel heard from God was something not beautiful at all. Things will not go well for his beloved teacher Eli. There's kind of a complicated back-story, but Eli's sons—who were also priests—had been abusing their power for a long time. God had warned them, over and over again, to treat the people under their care more justly, but they'd gone on, refusing to be faithful priests. And now, God said to Samuel, it's all going to catch up with them. And when it does, it will feel like punishment to Eli too. You are part of this story, Samuel, God was saying.

*That's* the calling of Samuel. To something that didn't feel to Samuel like winning at all. Toward a path that would, in the short term at least, cause pain to someone Samuel loved very much.

If I'd gotten that calling from God, I think I might have thought, "Yeah, probably not." And I'd have put away that "illusion" I'd had for a moment that maybe God was speaking to me. Too complicated. I want the kind of calling where I can see goodness and glory clearly ahead.

Denise Levertov, in her poem *Annunciation*, about the calling of the young girl Mary to be the mother of Jesus, wrote these words:

*Aren't there annunciations  
of one sort or another  
in most lives?  
...  
...[but] often  
those moments  
when roads of light and storm  
open from darkness in a man or woman,  
are turned away from*

*in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair  
and with relief.  
Ordinary lives continue.  
God does not smite them.  
But the gates close, the pathway vanishes.*

What keeps me from living for what I want to live for? It's too hard. It asks of me something I can't see the end point for. I want it laid out from beginning to end. I can't envision an unobstructed path to "making a difference" clearly enough. I turn away because *it might not work*. And when I turn away, lose that connection I felt for a moment, the gates close. The pathway vanishes.

It may be that everyone in this culture wants—maybe even needs—to identify a purpose for their lives. But that is not the same thing as faith. There is a difference between following your bliss, or discovering your own purpose, and the life of faith. The Christian story is an invitation to put yourself in a narrative that *God* is writing. A story that is about a world that is being re-claimed—for justice, for love. These may well be the same hopes you want for your own purpose. But *this* story is written by an author whose vision is bigger, more persistent, less fearful, than mine—or yours—could ever be.

This is a God whose ways of getting to the goal can seem quite indirect, and whose patience with interruptions seems endless. This is the God who took forty years to lead his people out of slavery and into a promised land that was less than 200 miles away from where they started. *Forty years*—for a journey they probably could have completed in two weeks if they'd marched straight across the desert. But look at what they learned—how they grew—along the way.

There is an old Portuguese proverb that says, "God writes straight with crooked lines." I think there's lots of good news for us in that truth. It means that God's story has room to pick each of us up along the way, even if it requires a detour. It means that *you* don't have to be in charge of seeing the whole purpose accomplished, from beginning to end. It means that *your* purpose—the thing you might live for—is only a piece of a whole picture that is still being drawn. By an artist with great mastery, infinite patience, love with a reach big enough to include everyone. Maybe you can find your purpose in *that* picture.