

*Visio, vocatio, missio*

First of all, I want to clear up a misconception. I don't speak, or read, or understand Latin. I know three words. ☺ I'll say more about them as we go. But for now I'd like to begin with a few of the words we heard earlier from Psalm 29. "*The voice of the Lord is powerful . . . the voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire . . . the voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness . . . the voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in God's temple all say, 'Glory!'*"

I've been through lots of tornado warnings in my life. But I've never actually been in a tornado. I've never heard that trademark "freight train" sound a tornado makes. I've seen the devastation caused by one. But I've never felt the wilderness shaking, or watched as the forest is stripped bare. Have you?

We don't know what kind of stormy experience the writer of Psalm 29 was describing. But it sure sounds like it could have been a tornado, especially the part about the whirling oaks. Interesting how the psalmist describes all of it—the thunder, the flashing flames of fire, the whirling oaks and snapping cedar trees—as being "the voice of the Lord." It's as if the psalmist is both terrified and awe-struck at the same time. Is this how we sometimes experience the voice and presence of God?

In this morning's passage from Isaiah, the prophet also sounds both terrified and awe-struck. So much so that when the pivots on the thresholds started to shake, and the house filled with smoke, all he could do is cry out "Woe is me! I am lost." Which maybe is another way of saying "glory!"

Our lives are relatively tame—and maybe even boring—much of the time. When God appears to us it's usually in that proverbial "still small voice" which we can barely hear, and even then only if we are listening for it. But every once in a while, unexpectedly, out of the quiet, God will slap us up the side of the head.

The Latin word *visio* means vision, appearance, apparition, face. As in, the face of God. I believe that from time to time, God shows us God's face in a dramatic, unexpected way. Perhaps a thunderstorm. And that the reason God does this is to get our attention. Assuming that's true, why would God want or need to get our attention?

Maybe we need to be reminded every once in a while of who we are—and conversely, who we are not. Namely, we are not God. Or to put it just a bit differently, maybe every once in a while we need to be reminded of who we are in relation to God. When was the last time you needed this reminder? In what way did God speak or appear to you? I invite you to ponder this for a few moments of silence.

Who are we in relation to God? That brings us to the second Latin word in today's sermon title, *vocatio*. Which means "call" or "calling," or more literally, vocation. Let's assume that God doesn't go to all this work to get our attention just to say "hi." God doesn't take pains to remind us who we are in relation to God and then say "Okay, that's all I wanted."

I propose that God goes to all this work to get our attention in order to call us. If you don't believe me, read the Bible. Book after book. Chapter after chapter. Character after character. Noah. Abraham. Moses. And that's just three of the "biblical big dogs." Think

about all the others. Called by God, everyone. Everyone a story. Sometimes the story is told in relatively undramatic terms. In Genesis 6:13, God just starts talking to Noah. No tornado. No smoke. Same thing in chapter 12 (which in my Bible at least has the caption “The Call of Abraham.” God just starts talking. “Now the Lord said to Abraham, ‘Go from your country . . . to the land that I will show you.’” No tornado. Just a . . . well, I’d call it a bombshell. “You want me to do what?”

But with Moses, there’s a bit more drama. First there was a flame of fire. A burning bush. That’s *visio*. And it worked. It got Moses attention, caused him to turn aside, to look at this “great sight.” Exodus 3:4—“When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses!’” Guess what Moses said? “Here I am.” Sound familiar? Exodus 3:6—“And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.” Afraid to look at God’s *visio*. Why was Moses afraid? Did he think God was going to hurt him? In a manner of speaking, yes. That’s it exactly. Phrase it what you will. Hurt. Disrupt. Interrupt. Awaken. Send off to a completely foreign land, like God did with Abraham. No wonder Moses was afraid. And not just Moses. Character after character. Story after story. When God calls you, there is no escape. Think Elijah. Elisha. Ezekiel. And today, Isaiah. It begins with *visio*. And then there’s *vocatio*.

Let’s be silent for a moment. Can you hear God calling?

When you finally have the courage to answer God’s call, so say “Here I am!” (And make no mistake; it can take incredible courage to engage the divine voice.) Then comes the crucial, critical question. What exactly is God calling us to do?

Which brings us to the third Latin word in our sermon title, “*missio*.” Which means “dispatching” or “sending,” or more literally, mission. God doesn’t call us to do nothing. God calls us to a *missio*.

Several of the commentators I read bemoaned the fact that the lectionary editors ended this morning’s passage from Isaiah 6 at verse 8, where Isaiah says, “Here am I; send me!” As important and climactic and profound (and for most of us, as difficult) as that is to finally say to God, “Here am I; send me!” that’s not the end of the story. In the Bible, that’s never the end of the story. That’s only the beginning. In Isaiah 6:9, God says to Isaiah, “Go and say to this people,” and then God tells him what to say. I’ll leave it to you to look it up on your own. But suffice it to say that it’s a difficult, challenging, unsettling message. But a message Isaiah’s people needed to hear.

Assuming we’ve finally quieted our busy selves or picked our frightened selves up off the ground long enough to listen, to what *missio* is God calling us? Today. Now. It doesn’t matter how old or young you are (if you don’t believe me, read the Bible; God calls them at all ages). It doesn’t matter how well you do or don’t speak, or preach, or play the guitar. It doesn’t matter if you’re tired. Or retired. In fact, that’s when our vocation or *vocatio* and then our *missio* often gets a fresh new start. In recent months Lois and I have felt the foundation start to shake, have smelt the smoke in the house, have seen a burning bush. We have stopped, heard God’s voice, and finally, maybe a bit hesitantly, replied, “Here am I; send me.” And now we wait.

What about you?