

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
August 19, 2018

Summoned and Sent

Acts 21:37-22:21

There's a monastery in France that includes a beautiful sculpture above one of its doorways. It depicts the story of Pentecost, with the sending of the apostles to the ends of the earth. Fire descends upon them and wind blows them forth into the world as witnesses to the gospel. As one person has put it, "Christ's hands are thrown open as if casting the apostles to the four winds. Those who have come toward Christ are now sent out by Christ."¹ You might expect that kind of imagery to be visible to the faithful as they leave the sacred space of worship. But what's interesting is that the sculpture appears above the doorway as folks enter. In other words, worshipers are greeted with a depiction of commissioning. As soon as they arrive, they're already being told that they're sent.

There's a piece of woodwork above our sanctuary entrance. It says: Enter to Worship, Depart to Serve. So as soon as you arrive at the church doors, there's a reminder that your coming is inseparable from your going. True worship involves both entering and exiting. The movement and work of the Spirit includes both gathering and sending. God gives us both an assembly and an assignment.

"What shall I do, Lord?" That's what Paul asks during his worshipful encounter with the risen Jesus in today's Scripture passage. "'Get up,' the Lord said, 'and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do'" (22:10). The details of Paul's assignment would be spelled out as he spent time in and with the community of Christians. This fellowship of believers that was growing into its God-given vocation would be the context where Paul's eyes were opened to see more clearly his own particular part in the Lord's purposes.

One woman tells about a series of youth crusades being held at her church, during which she and her husband's youngest child and middle child made public professions of faith in Jesus. On the final night of the crusade their oldest son made his way, very slowly, to the altar. After the service, his dad spoke to him about the decision. "Yes," replied the boy, "it was very hard to make it down front." It turns out that he had taken the speaker's words very literally when he said, "Every head bowed and every eye closed." He had made his way to the altar without looking.²

Though his eyes were literally closed, this boy had been given spiritual optics to see who Jesus was. In our text, Paul comes away literally blinded by the revelation of Christ. Others had to take him by the hand and lead him into Damascus, where he would regain his sight and be given spiritual vision about his assignment. And that's because this story is not only about Paul's conversion but also about his commission. Ananias tells Paul, "The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard" (22:14-15).

Sounds like a good time for Ananias to go ahead and pronounce the benediction, giving Paul his personal blessing and sending him on his way. Actually, Ananias does say to Paul, "And now what are you waiting for? Get up." But not "Get up, head for the church exit, and get

to work for the Lord." First, something else happens. "Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name" (22:16).

For Paul and the early Christians, baptism wasn't just a minor religious exercise tacked onto the end of the worship service, just to certify that a person has met the requirements necessary to be added to the church membership roll. No, baptism was a vivid sign of God's redeeming grace reaching out to lay hold of us through Christ, claiming us to be his people, and commissioning us for our task of being witnesses for the kingdom.

Baptism signifies a believer's initiation into the covenant community, not on the basis of his or her worthiness or accomplishments, but on the basis of God's forgiveness of sins. Remember that it's God's mercy, not our own merit, that gathers us into the life of God's people. You can't come into the kingdom by your own attempts to polish up your spiritual image or by your own efforts to smooth off the rough edges of your behavior. You need more than just improvement. You need cleansing and washing. You need more than just renovation. You need to be totally remade, by the saving, life-giving power of God in Christ.

And this is what happens when God comes calling. It doesn't necessarily mean that your own encounter with Christ will be a Damascus Road type of conversion experience, a dramatic and immediate turnaround in your attitudes and actions. For some people, including Paul, that's the way that God comes to them and works to give them a new identity and a new mission in life. As author Flannery O'Connor once said of Paul, "I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse."³

In a museum at the Vatican, there's a sixteenth-century sculpture entitled "Habakkuk and the Angel." According to one author,

In this masterpiece, Habakkuk is holding a packed bag, as if he is traveling somewhere, and his movement is forward, as if he is walking ahead. However, his movement is impeded by an angel hovering above him, who has grabbed this startled prophet by the hair, as if lifting him to heaven.

There is something about that image that is so apropos to us. Some of us are very much on our own way, walking in a very different direction than God would have us walk. We need to be redirected, to be pulled by the hair, if you will, up into the heavens to see what Habakkuk saw (1:1)—a vision of God. For only a vision of the triune God can produce this kind of . . . living, walking, moving forward, lifted high . . . kind of faith.⁴

Paul's experience of the risen Jesus was the kind of encounter with heavenly reality that sent him moving in a different direction with a different mission.

For many others, including most of us here today, God's call in our lives has probably been less dramatic, but no less powerful or life-changing. Light from heaven has shone into our lives through the preaching and teaching of God's Word, through personal and congregational worship, through the example of other disciples, through the shared life of family and friends, and through personal experiences in the seemingly ordinary rhythms of daily life. Through a range of relationships, experiences, and practices, you've heard the voice that we most need to hear, the voice of the Lord, calling you to acknowledge who he is, what he has done for you, and what he wants you to do for him. And baptism is a very public way of sharing this news that your eyes have been opened to the reality that Jesus is Lord of all, and that you want your life to exhibit and point to that reality.

That means there's work to be done. Author Kurt Vonnegut wrote a novel called *Timequake*. It centers on a series of stories about people who have lost control of their lives. Instead of determining their own destinies, they enter a "timequake" where they're forced to repeat the same bad choices over and over again without any possibility of improvement or redemption. Eventually the timequake ends, and the people have the opportunity to live their own lives. But most of them are still beset by what's called "Post-Timequake-Apathy" (PTA), which keeps them immobilized by despair. One of the main characters, Kilgore Trout, is the only one who isn't gripped by this condition. Near the end of the story, he tries to revive others by repeating this motto: "You were sick, but now you're well, and there's work to do."⁵

As one preacher has pointed out, "That's a good description of every Christian's experience. I was sick. Now I'm well. And now there's work to do. God in his infinite love doesn't just save, clean us, and dump us. He saves us, cleans us, and employs us." Baptism declares that you're not only saved from but also saved for. It says that you're not only a beneficiary of the gospel but also a bearer of the gospel. Baptism acknowledges and announces that you're a person under commission, a man or woman, boy or girl, on assignment from God, doing your part in promoting the kingdom and spreading the good news of Jesus Christ.

In some parts of the church, including certain Baptist groups, the laying on of hands on believers after their baptism has been a cherished practice, signifying how new Christians receive through the church the blessing of God and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit for a life of mission and ministry. At this point, Emma may be thinking to herself, "Does this mean they're not done with me yet? They already dunked me. Now are they going to lay hands on my head?" No, that's not part of the plan for today's service.

Plus, so many other parts of today's gathering have already testified to how Emma is called by God and claimed by God in Christ. Her knowledge that God has called her and commissioned her to a life of following Jesus and serving Jesus will both ground her and guide her as she grows in faith. I like the way that one preacher has put it when he says:

Few things are more sad than an unsent life. What a joy, in good times, but especially in bad, to believe that you are where you are because you have been put there; you are doing what you are doing because God means for this to be so. Every follower of Jesus Christ, clergy or not, is sent.⁶

Emma, you, along with all your fellow believers surrounding you here today, are summoned and sent. You may not have an assignment on the scale of what Paul was commissioned to do. But in your own unique experience of coming to faith in Christ, heavenly light has shone upon you and the Lord has spoken to you. Your baptism testifies to your willingness to be obedient to his voice. And here within the life of your church family, your own local fellowship of disciples, you'll progress deeper into what the call of God, and the commission of God, look like in your life. So you've entered to worship. Now depart to serve.

¹ William H. Willimon, *How Odd of God: Chosen for the Curious Vocation of Preaching*. Kindle ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015).

² Rebecca Cohsenbein, "Lite Fare."

³ Quoted in William Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988).

⁴ Doug O'Donnell, *God's Lyrics* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2010) 105.

⁵ From Mark Buchanan's sermon, "The House of Love;" Kurt Vonnegut, *Timequake* (New York: Berkeley Trade, 1998) 196-97.

⁶ Willimon, *How Odd of God*.