

When God's call is surprising and familiar

Karen Schellenberg

Twenty years ago, at six o'clock on a Saturday morning, at a camp on the south shore of Lake Manitoba, God called me to be a pastor. God's call was surprising and yet familiar, loud and yet completely silent, from somewhere outside of me and yet also from some place within. My encounter with God was holy, personal, and deeply meaningful. I have usually hesitated to tell this story because I fear people will not believe me or will think me spiritually arrogant by putting myself in the same league as Moses or Mary or Paul. It is difficult to put into words what God's call sounded like. It was not a voice but more of a feeling, a knowing,

a warmth, or a nudge. I knew instantly that it was God, and I knew what God was saying to me. I walked out of my cabin after God called me and experienced a light-ness as I moved toward an early morning meeting.

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We were gathered as a church community for a retreat so that we could listen for God's voice together as we continued to search for pastoral leadership for our congregation. Our search was not going well. We were exhausted and in need of a divine breakthrough. My

task was to join a small group of church members who would fill in for our weekend facilitator who had cancelled at the last minute. As I walked, I vowed to keep my encounter with God to myself. I was still processing it and did not know what words I would use to describe God's call, even if I tried. Moreover, I wanted to keep this holy gift for myself—at least for the time being.

All day, as I led and participated in the discussion, my mind kept flashing back to my encounter with God that morning. I wondered what would become of that call. Was it for now? For later? For someday in the distant future? And then, in the midst of all that was said that weekend,

one man said, “What if we already have the gifts in our group, and what if God is leading us to find a pastor from within?”

Instantly I felt a very great warmth from inside of me. I felt like everyone in the room was looking at me (but no one was). I felt like no one moved or talked for a long time (except they did). I felt like I was rising off

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my chair, while at the same time crawling under my chair to get away from the intense feelings I was experiencing. Ruth Haley Barton writes, “When God calls, it is a very big deal. It is holy ground. It produces within us such a reverence and awe that it’s hard to know what to do with ourselves.”¹ My solo encounter with God earlier that morning had (potentially) just been clarified by the community of God’s people. Without knowing how this would unfold, I gave myself over to a journey that evidently God was inviting me to take.

In the following months, that small country church called me to be their pastor, and I have provided pastoral leadership in three other congregations since.

As I reflect on my “call” experience, I now see it more as a clarification than a call. My life experiences and education to that point had prepared me for pastoral ministry; and although I was not actively seeking a job as a pastor, it was not outside of the realm of possibilities. My encounter with God simply told me the time was right to enter more fully into the life and vocation that God knew would lead me to becoming more completely the person I was created to be. Palmer J. Parker says it well: “Vocation does not come from a voice ‘out there’ calling me to be something I am not. It comes from a voice ‘in here’ calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given to me at birth by God.”²

When God called me, there was not a burning bush, a visit from an angel, or a blinding light from heaven; but the experience was life changing just the same. God called me at just the right time, in just the right way, so that I stopped, listened, and knew. I treasure this story and

1 Ruth Haley Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2018), 74.

2 Palmer J. Parker, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 10.

remember it often, especially when I feel overwhelmed or uncertain. In those times, I claim again the words of assurance God spoke to my biblical mentor Moses who was also called to a vocation for which he had been created. God said to Moses, God says to me, God says to all who are called, "I will be with you" (Exodus 3:12, NRSV).

About the author

Karen Schellenberg continues to grow into her call to pastoral ministry. After serving two congregations as a long-term pastor, she recently began her second stint as an interim pastor. Karen and her husband Tony live in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and enjoy frequent visits from their two grandchildren and three married children.