

## *Our Calling*

by Rev. Joe Connolly

“As it was written in the prophet, Isaiah, / ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, / who will prepare your way’; / a herald’s voice in the desert crying out: / ‘Prepare, make ready the way of our God. / Clear a straight path.’” — Mark 1:2-3.

A couple of weeks ago I was tapped on, pressured into— I suppose recruited would be a nicer way to say it— I was recruited by members of our Susquehanna Association to offer the Sermon at the installation of the Rev. Mr. Allen Armstrong, the new pastor at the Sherburne United Church of Christ. My first reaction was OMG... two sermons in one day.

But then again, I preach two sermons a Sunday at least twelve times a year since once a month I preach at a Sunday afternoon service at Chenango Valley Home. In fact, I shall be doing that this very afternoon. I always offer a different sermon over there, so if would you like to hear me again— or to be more blunt, if you want to torture yourself one more time— you can come and listen to what I have to say there.

In any case, at every installation there are actually two sermons for the price of one. One is the so called ‘charge to the church.’ The second is the charge to the pastor. I was assigned to talk to the church. And, as is the tradition in this neck of the woods, a representative from the Conference, in this case the Rev. Dr. Marsha Williams, was to follow me with the charge to the pastor.

Hence, the first thing I spoke about on taking the pulpit was I had been placed in the unenviable position of preceding Marsha’s comments. Since she has already addressed this congregational those of you who heard her realize Marsha knows a thing or two about preaching.

Next, having noted Marsha and I were preaching, I said this very fact should inform us about covenant commitment among our churches And that covenant commitment is about people. These were my exact words (quote:) “We all have our roots in the local church. But church— and the word church does not mean a building— this building is a meeting house— the word church means people. The real definition of the very word ‘church’ is much more expansive than common usage would have it.”

Then I said even though I have been in this Association 22 years, it was unlikely many people knew my background, my story. After all, pulpit exchange among pastors is fairly rare these days. So whereas most of you know my background, outside of this place, this pulpit, it’s not something that often comes up. So I told them I was going to use my story, my personal history, as I wanted to address what is often referred to as a call, or as clergy often and inappropriately refer to it: “my call.”

And so I spoke about growing up Roman Catholic. As I often say, with a name like Joseph Francis Connolly, Jr. that is really hard to hide. I said I shifted to the Episcopal Church in my 20s and when I was 40 I saw the light and became a Congregationalist. I joined First Parish Church, United Church of Christ, Brunswick, Maine.

Next I noted at least since I was 20 people had been telling me I should be a pastor. I paid no heed. I, in fact, once asked an Episcopal Priest friend what the call felt like. This Priest said, “Oh, it felt terrible. I cried for hours.” I said, “Great! I don’t have one.”

Now, in the coffee hour space at the Brunswick Church a Bangor Seminary poster was stapled to the wall. It had postcards attached. Send us a card and we’ll send you information. So I did.

After being on their mailing list a while the Seminary sent me a letter. ‘Do you I want to stay on the list?’ I wrote back saying ‘yes.’ What did the seminary do? They sent me a catalogue. Why? Your guess is as good as mine.

A couple of days later, a Saturday, Bonnie needed to be away. I was bored out of my skull. I decided to bore myself some more and read the catalogue.

As I sat reading I started to cry. Have you ever read a Seminary catalogue? Course descriptions— beyond boring— and I was crying. Then I remembered what my Episcopal Priest friend said about what the call felt like. “It felt terrible. I cried for hours.”

Now, when a pastor writes an ordination paper there is an expectation that the story of the call will be told and that story will go on for pages and pages and pages. So what you just heard, my friends, is the short version of my call and I shared some of it at the installation in Sherburne since the Association members there assembled and the members of the Sherburne Church had not heard it. Of course, many of you have heard pieces of this story before. Only some of you, I think, have not.

So, having entertained (question mark) them with this story, the next thing I shared in Sherburne was that when I hold Confirmation sessions here I present three short videos by Michael Himes, a Jesuit, a Professor of Theology at Boston College on discernment. These do not address a call to ministry since Himes gives these talks to incoming Freshmen at BC.

The presentation is called “Three Key Questions.” These are the questions: ‘Is whatever it is you are considering to be a call on your life, for your life, a source of joy?’ ‘Is this something that taps into your talents, gifts in the fullest way?’ ‘Last, will those around you affirm the call and do you have the courage to respond?’ (Slight pause.)

We find these words in the work commonly called Mark: “As it was written in the prophet, Isaiah, / ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, / who will prepare your way’; / a herald’s voice in the desert crying out: / ‘Prepare, make ready the way of our God. / Clear a straight path.’” (Slight pause.)

Earlier I said we clergy often inappropriately refer to the what we do as “my call.” “My call” is inappropriate because it is not “my call.”

You see, that last question Himes tackles is key and it applies not just to church, not just to clergy, but to bankers, car mechanics, doctors, plumbers, etc., etc., etc. “Will those around you affirm the call and do you have the courage to respond?” Any call is, at least in part, the call of those around us to us, the call on us to us of the community around us. (Slight pause.)

All that leads me back to this opening passage from Mark. You see— and I have said this here before— we need to listen to Scripture with First Century ears, not Twenty-first Century ears. Our Twenty-first Century ears pay too much attention to the story of the Baptizer, John.

I think we Twenty-first Century types like stories. On the other hand, I think we Twenty-first Century types do not seem particularly interested in understanding the message behind the story. Hence, we dwell on the content of the story without asking what the story means.

We need to understand the reason nearly any story is recorded in Scripture is not because of the story, itself. The story may be interesting— the story about the Baptizer, it’s details what John looks like, what John eats,

what John says, all that is interesting. But that is not why the story gets recorded. A story is told to illustrate meaning— *illustrate meaning*.

Equally, the meaning here can be found when Mark quotes Isaiah. The point of the story is to reenforce the quote. And, therefore, I want to suggest the point of the story is not the Baptizer, not John.

The point of the story is John listened to what Isaiah had to say. The point of the story is John listened to the call of God. And, indeed, John acted on the call of God.

Further, when Mark quotes the prophet Isaiah, the meaning of the passage is laid out. And I think the meaning is straightforward.

Our call— *our call*— is to clear a path, prepare the way, make straight a highway— and as the fuller quote from Isaiah says— lift up, fill or lay low the mountains and valleys, make rough places, the ground level— like a plain. Do all that for Whom? Note ourselves. It's not about us. Do it for God.

I also want to suggest when the passage turns toward the story of the Baptizer, when the story tries to illustrate the meaning, by telling us the story of John, the writer explores what the result of listening and answering the call of God might be like. (Quote:) “And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to John and were baptized...” (Slight pause.)

You see, sharing the call is vital to the community. And sharing the call also builds community when the community listens.

And that brings us back to the third key question of life posed by the Rev. Himes. “Will those around you affirm the call and do you have the courage to respond?” (Slight pause.)

So, what does should the story of John say to us? What does it mean? I think its meaning is simple.

Do we in the United Church of Christ— it's not just pastors who hear a call— do we in the United Church of Christ *of Norwich*, this church— all of us— have the courage to respond to the call of God together as we discern the call of God on the life of the community?’ Amen.

United Church of Christ, First Congregational, Norwich, New York  
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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “I came across a quote from Pope Francis, who is becoming a wonderful source of quotes. The Pontiff said we humans need to be more concerned with encountering one another than with confronting one another. I am not suggesting that confrontation fails to be appropriate sometimes. I am suggesting— and I think this is what Francis may have been suggesting— that encountering now means confronting will never be necessary. Or, as the Apostle Paul says we need to speak the truth in love. And that, I think, is a call of God on our lives.”

BENEDICTION: Let us be present to one another as we go from this place. Let us share our gifts, our hopes, our memories, our pain and our joy. Go in joy for God knows every fiber of our being. Go in hope for God reveals to us, daily, that we are a part of God's new creation. Go in love, for we rest assured, by Christ, Jesus, that God is steadfast. Go in peace for God is with us. And may the peace of God which surpasses understanding be with us this day and forevermore. Amen.