

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

March 15, 2014 at 6:00am

An open-ended call

by Roger Karban

Scripture for Life

Call narratives are some of the most significant parts of our Scriptures, yet also some of the most ignored and misunderstood.

Growing up Catholic, I thought the only people actually called by God were priests and nuns. They alone received some special, heavenly invitation to carry on Jesus' work. Though I also heard that married and single people were called to their particular state of life, what it practically boiled down to was if you aren't called to be a priest or nun, you could assume you were probably being called to be married. But if for some reason or another you weren't married, then God must have designated you for the single state.



Second Sunday of Lent

Genesis 12:1-4a
Such a theology isn't biblical.

Psalm 33

2 Timothy 1:8b-10
First of all, priests in Scripture weren't called; they were born. Only those men belonging to a specific Jewish tribe, clan and family could be priests. No one went into a seminary and studied to be one. The author of 1 Peter 2:9 employs the term "priesthood" in that sense. But counter to his predecessors in the Hebrew Scriptures, he's convinced that what was once reserved for only a few men -- royalty and priesthood -- is now shared in by all followers of Jesus.

Our sacred authors knew nothing of a distinction between clergy and laity as we speak of it today. Biblical people are simply called to be disciples of Yahweh or Jesus. Specific tasks or ministries might eventually surface within those calls, but the call itself is always open-ended.

The Pauline disciple responsible for writing 2 Timothy reminds his community of one of the most important aspects of such calls: There's no rhyme or reason for one to be called and not another. We can't do anything to prepare ourselves for it, except to keep our ears open.

"He [God] saved us and called us to a holy life, not according to our works but according to his own design and the grace bestowed on us in Christ Jesus before time began, but now made manifest through the appearance of our savior Christ Jesus."

Today's first reading contains Scripture's first call: Yahweh's call to Abram. He and Sarai are the first humans to have Yahweh as their God. Their call will set the pattern for all other biblical calls.

The first element to note is Yahweh's command: "Go!" Biblical calls always demand we move. We're expected to leave the "place" -- either geographical or psychological -- where we're comfortably ensconced and go somewhere else. No one in Scripture is ever commanded, "Stay right where you are! Don't move a muscle!" God always expects us to change our position: either to alter our physical location or our frame of mind. Those who are called should always have their bags packed.

Second, our relocation always includes some insecurity. In Abram's case, he and his wife are expected to "Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father's house." We're expected to abandon what once provided us comfort and stability.

What do we get in exchange? We're never quite certain.

Abram and Sarai are to go to "a land that I will show you." Where that will geographically take them is never detailed in the actual call. Likewise, Jesus' Marcan disciples are simply expected to "Follow me" to a unique, uncharted mindset in which humans will be more important to them than fish.

Biblical callers can never be sued for breach of promise. The person called is never told the exact particulars of the call. Once they relinquish their security, they begin to experience a process of wonderment and discovery.

Notice also that Abram is called to follow an actual person. Unless he first gives himself over to Yahweh, he'll never find out where Yahweh is leading him. Jesus expects the same of his followers.

Anyone who has ever given themselves over to another person -- especially in marriage -- realizes that the discovery of where you're going is also a discovery of the person traveling with you.

This happens in today's Gospel passage. Jesus' followers eventually discover qualities in him they never noticed during their first encounter on the Galilean seashore. He's the God among us for whom they and their fellow Jews have been longing.

If we buy into the theology that only special people in the faith community receive calls, we'll have a hard time hearing God or the risen Jesus calling us.

"Salvation history" is our salvation history. All of us are called to participate in God's saving actions. But if we don't notice that we're even being called, God's salvation is going to take a longer time to be realized than God originally intended.

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