

Call and Response

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Scripture: Psalm 27:1, 4-9, Matthew 4:12-23

Hymns: Here I am, Lord (VT 545), Will You Come and Follow Me (VT 540)

Psalm 27:1, 4-9:

The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?

⁴ One thing I asked of the LORD;
this I seek:

to live in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the LORD,
and to inquire in his temple.

⁵ For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;

he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.

⁶ Now my head is lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;

I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

⁷ Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud;

be gracious to me and answer me!

⁸ “Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!”
Your face, LORD, do I seek.

⁹ Do not hide your face from me.

Do not turn your servant away in anger,
you who have been my help.

Do not cast me off; do not forsake me,
O God of my salvation!

Matthew 4:12-23:

¹² Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³ He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴ so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

¹⁵ “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the gentiles—

¹⁶ the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,

and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned.”

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

¹⁸ As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishers. ¹⁹ And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

²³ Jesus went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

My five-year-old daughter recently asked me, "Does God have a phone?" I don't know what prompted her to ask this question (aside from the presence of phones and other technology in all our lives these days), but I tried to answer it with something like, well, prayer is kind of like talking to God on the phone. The thing is, I explained, we don't even need a phone to talk to God, because God is always close to us, caring for us, listening if we need to talk. It reminded me of that old gospel song from the 1950s, "Operator, Information, Give Me Jesus on the Line" (written by Wynona Carr and William Spivery) – something that sounds like it belongs in the Saskatune Singers' repertoire! It seems this idea of calling God up on the phone has been around for a while, as this song talks about calling "long distance" to heaven to speak with Jesus, "a friend of mine." "Prayer is the number, faith is the exchange, heaven is the city, Jesus is the name, / Operator, information, give me Jesus on the line." What's interesting is that in the song, the operator never does connect the caller to Jesus – they wonder why it's taking so long and spend the whole song repeating the request.¹ Prayer can sometimes feel like this, can't it? Like a phone call that just isn't going through, a call that gets dropped and lost in the void.

As you may have noticed, the lectionary texts for this season are focused around stories of call, as Patrick spoke about last week. Our Scripture texts for today talk about calls and responses in an interestingly mutual or two-sided way. Unlike in the song, it's not only we who call on God, but also God who calls on us. And the question of how those responses will go – or whether or not they will come – is part of the equation. So let's take a closer look.

¹ To read the lyrics and hear the song, see: <https://christianrefuge.org/gospel-song-operator-information-give-me-jesus-on-the-line/>

Our first Scripture passage is from Psalm 27. This is a prayer that calls on God to rescue the psalmist from danger; this is a request from a person to God. But perhaps unexpectedly, that's not where the psalm begins. Instead, it starts by declaring that God is a God of rescue and protection: "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" The reason the psalmist feels confident in bringing this request to God in the first place is because of who God is: God is pre-eminently a God of rescue, safety, and protection. This is the God of Exodus, who hears the cries of the people as they suffer in slavery in Egypt. And this is a God who responds to those cries with deliverance – the God of compassion. So before the psalmist has even articulated the request to God, they assert that God is a God of rescue. The subtext here is that surely God will live up to that aspect of the Divine identity again! That's just who God is.

The second part of the psalm similarly anticipates what will happen when – not if, when – God responds to the psalmist. It's again taken as a given that God will respond. So God is a God of rescue and therefore will respond and rescue me from this particular threat I am facing. And notice that this place of safety is named as the Temple, the house or tent of the Lord, that place of sanctuary: "For [God] will hide me in [God's] shelter in the day of trouble; [God] will conceal me under the cover of [God's] tent; [God] will set me high on a rock." The psalmist is so sure that God will rescue them, they even foresee their own happy response after being rescued: "Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the LORD." It's only after these declarations that the psalmist makes the request itself.

Now this combination of making a request to God for help and confidence in God's future rescue is found elsewhere in the Psalms, and I bring it up every chance I get in my sermons! It's a move anticipating God's positive response to one's call for help, and it's such a unique theological move – in one sense expressing deep, unshakeable trust in God despite the discouraging circumstances all around. Walter Brueggemann calls it the “movement from *plea* to *praise*” which “is one of the most startling in all Old Testament literature.”² It's like thanking God for rescue in advance, before it has even happened. But notice that the structure of this psalm is actually reversed: the confidence in God's rescue comes first, and then the request for rescue itself. Jewish commentator Robert Alter puts it this way: “This psalm is a supplication in which, as elsewhere, a speaker in great distress implores God to intervene on [their] behalf. The distinction of emphasis is that the poem begins with a confident affirmation of God as the source of help under all grave threats. ... But this sense of trust ... does not preclude a feeling of fearful urgency in the speaker's plea to God.”³

When the request finally comes, toward the end of the psalm, that sense of confidence seems to have melted away, and the tone is one of “fearful urgency,” as Alter observes.

Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud;
be gracious to me and answer me!
⁸ “Come,” my heart says, “seek [God's] face!”
Your face, LORD, do I seek.
⁹ Do not hide your face from me.
Do not turn your servant away in anger,
you who have been my help.
Do not cast me off; do not forsake me,
O God of my salvation!

² Walter Brueggemann, *The Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 34.

³ Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2007), 91.

This whole Psalm strikes me as reflecting a particularly Hebrew, Old Testament way of relating to God. These words are spoken in all their raw and painful honesty as a way of urging God to act: challenging God to live up to God's promises and God's identity and God's side of the covenant relationship.⁴ It seems to have the bluntness of saying, "If you're our God and we're your people then prove it! Rescue me! I know you will! And then I'll sing you a song of joy after! Please help me, God. I'm so afraid." There is a profound familiarity and vulnerability before God here, and the rawness of mixed emotions – both the confidence and the fear – all is brought to that call to God, urging God to respond with help and rescue. That's quite a call to make, and we're left wondering what happened. Did God respond? Did the person find their hopes for safety fulfilled? This Psalm leaves these questions unanswered – perhaps another realistic aspect of this particular Psalm. Or perhaps it is enough for the psalmist to have voiced these fears and hopes to God; maybe that's the point, and already brings some relief, a sense that one is not alone. Asking for help is, as they say, the first step, and often a difficult one.

In our second Scripture passage from the lectionary, we have a very different account of calls and responses. First, we are given the context of Jesus' overall ministry, which is framed as God's response to a very ancient call – that of the people in the time of the prophet Isaiah (730s BCE), who called on God for deliverance from the darkness of the shadow of death. On these people, dawn has finally come in the form of Jesus' ministry. So that's one call and response here: Jesus as God's long-awaited response to the hopeful calls from centuries before.

⁴ Brueggemann, 35.

Of course, the most obvious call and response in this story comes from Jesus to his first disciples. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus starts off his ministry with a call for repentance and an announcement that the Kingdom or Reign of God is near. In the region of Galilee, he sets out to find the first of his disciples: "As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishers. ¹⁹ And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people." ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him." It's striking that Jesus' call to these two sets of brothers is met with such an instant response! For both, we are told that they "immediately" left their fishing boats and nets and followed Jesus. They certainly waste no time in responding to Jesus' call! This is in contrast to other call stories in the Bible, such as that of the prophet Samuel who, as a child, repeatedly thought it was his mentor Eli calling him in the night (1 Samuel 3), or Mary, who had so many puzzled questions of the angel Gabriel (Luke 1).

As commentator Jillian Engelhardt states, "Some have wondered why Simon Peter and Andrew would walk away so quickly. Did they know Jesus beforehand? Were the sons of Zebedee more likely to follow Jesus because they saw the encounter with Simon Peter and Andrew? Were the men somehow disgruntled with their work? Were the sons of Zebedee disgruntled with their father?" She concludes that perhaps there was a deeper political reason, especially given that they were in Capernaum, in the region of Galilee, a place where the (Gentile) Roman occupation had a strong presence.

So another possibility is that “these sets of brothers were likely under contract with the Roman Empire. ‘As brothers, and possibly members of a cooperative with James and John (4:21), they have purchased a lease or contract with Rome’s agents that allows them to fish and obligates them to supply a certain quality of fish.’ Their actions in following Jesus were a disruption, even if small, to Rome’s economic interests.”⁵ Given the choice between joining Jesus’ ministry of healing and good news and continuing to serve the shadow of death that Roman occupation has cast over their people, these four disciples do not hesitate to choose Jesus’ way. This seems like a no-brainer to them! As Engelhardt puts it: “By choosing Jesus, the brothers choose God’s rule over Rome. They choose to ‘fish’ their land and the people in it for God’s purposes rather than exploiting it for Rome’s gain. ... Rome wanted the men to catch fish to advance their imperialist expansion. Jesus wants them to catch people for God’s rule, which as Jesus will demonstrate throughout the rest of the Gospel, is a rule of mercy and justice and plenty.”⁶

So, where does this leave us? Do we have Jesus on the phone line yet? As we sit with these biblical stories for the week, I invite us to ponder their meaning for our lives and context. In what ways is God responding to ancient calls in our time and place? And in what way are we being called to be part of God’s ways as they unfold? As many of our neighbours struggle to put food on the table amid inflation and rising costs, what is our call? As the land groans under the destructive actions of those who put economic gain over the needs of people and ecosystems, what is our call? As all of us

⁵ See Jillian Engelhardt, “Commentary on Matthew 4: 12-23, *Working Preacher*, accessed Jan. 10, 2023, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-412-23-6> .

⁶ Engelhardt, “Commentary on Matthew 4.”

in this land, Indigenous and settler, continue to try and live into the 94 Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, what is our call? These are just some examples of where this sense of call takes us. And while these issues may seem daunting, I came across two really encouraging ways of looking at them: one, injustice is like a web or a net, so that any small way in which we pull at it and start to break it begins to unravel the whole. And two: we are not called to do this kind of work alone; that is not sustainable. When a choir holds sustained notes, they can continue because they take turns with their breaths. And that is how Jesus' ongoing ministry of good news and healing is sustained as well, and how it has been sustained over the millennia. May you each find hope this week in the interweaving of the different calls and responses these texts leave us with: the strong hope that God is the God of response and deliverance, that God also calls us to respond, and that in this mutual conversation, new life and healing emerge, answering all creation's call to be renewed and restored.

AMEN