

So Elijah went from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him.²⁰ Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah. “Let me kiss my father and mother good-bye,” he said, “and then I will come with you.”

“Go back,” Elijah replied. “What have I done to you?”

²¹ So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his attendant. (1 Kings 19:19-21)

A Call Changes Your Life

Most of us experience crucial turning points in our lives. Sometimes, it's obvious when it happens. The day we found out we were expecting a child, the day my wife agreed to marry me – those events obviously changed our lives forever. Other times, things happen that didn't seem like a big deal at the time, but when you look back, you have to admit that they changed your life, too. I think most people expect that going into the ministry must be the result of some big, life-changing experience. That was not true for me. The idea of being a pastor didn't really appeal to me until I was in catechism class and then only because someone told me about Michigan Lutheran Seminary and it sounded like a big adventure to go there. Now, that wasn't the end of the story. But there was never this moment of earthshattering decision. When I look back on a kid I haven't spoken to in more than thirty years telling me about MLS, it did not feel like a life changing experience. You know what did? Being ordained. Being installed as missionary to Colombia. Being installed as your pastor here – in fact, just receiving the call to come here almost eight years ago. Those were life changing moments and I knew it when they happened. This morning, we want to use an Old Testament lesson about God calling a man to serve to consider what effect his call has. **A divine call changes your life.**

I.

This morning, we see that in the call that God gave Elisha. Now, Elisha didn't get a phone call from a vacancy pastor and then get a form – which we call the “diploma of vocation” – in the mail. Elisha's call came to him from Elijah, who had already been serving as God's prophet for years. His ministry was winding down. God told him to anoint Elisha to be his successor. But the Bible doesn't record Elijah pouring oil on Elisha's head, although that probably happened. Rather, Elijah came and he threw his cloak around Elisha's shoulders. With that action, God was calling him to join Elijah's ministry. Later, when Elijah ascended into heaven, that same cloak fell from the chariot of fire that carried Elijah into heaven. It was a symbol of his prophetic ministry and by throwing it over Elisha's shoulders, Elijah called him to be a prophet.

That's pretty unusual in the Old Testament. I don't just mean the throwing the cloak over his shoulders. This is the only time that happened. But most of the prophets God called in the Old Testament he called directly. God came to Moses in a burning bush. Isaiah saw a vision of angels in heaven. But Elijah had the same kind of call that pastors and teachers receive today: the Holy Spirit worked through the visible church – in this case, through the prophet Elijah – to call a man to serve.

Elisha then asked Elijah to let him go back and kiss his father and mother good-bye. Elisha understood that entering the ministry was going to change his life forever. When he made his request, Elijah said, **“Go back. What have I done to you?”** Was this a rebuke? I don't think so. Rather Elijah was telling Elisha that he was asking the wrong person for permission. Elijah did not call Elisha. God did. And only God could judge Elisha's desire to say good-bye to his parents. Now we can see from the rest of his actions that Elisha was not trying to delay his calling. He was not trying to avoid what God was asking him to do. He was making a clean break with the life he had lived before. In that time and place, parents, especially fathers, had authority over their children for as long as those parents lived. By saying goodbye, Elisha was leaving his father's authority and submitting to God's.

God calls men and women to ministry. That call always changes your life. The call places a pastor or a teacher first and foremost under God's authority. Now, don't misunderstand me. As the pastor of Peace, I am answerable to this congregation. Our teachers are answerable. The congregation makes thousands of decisions that affect how we do ministry. But even so, our first allegiance is to the Lord. When I was installed as your

pastor, I swore to God that I would teach and preach in accordance with his word, whether you like it or not. Sometimes a pastor finds himself in a very uncomfortable situation because some member of some prominent family is guilty of sin. When the pastor confronts him or her, that member might answer, “After all that I’ve done for this congregation, you’re going to treat me like this?” He or she might call the district president and demand that the pastor’s actions be overruled. That’s happened to me. I once had a parent complaining to me about a teacher and when I told him what the Bible said about the issue, he said to me, “We’re not talking about the Bible. We’re talking about real life!”

But pastors and teachers don’t get to make the distinction. Neither do members. God’s word is the final authority over ministry. Sometimes Christians struggle with that. They look at pastors and teachers as people who were hired and can be fired. And if we are unfaithful, we should be removed from our ministries. But the standard is our doctrine and our lives. Are we teaching what God says? Are we able to fulfill our duties? Are we living a life that gives a good testimony to Christ? If the answer to all three of those questions is yes, then a pastor or teacher cannot simply be fired.

Do we pastors and teachers show the same obedience to God’s call that Elisha did? Do we hear the voice of the Lord in the call that we received? Do we stand up for the truth, even when it’s hard? Do we conduct our lives with love for God and his Word and also with love for his people whom we serve here? God called us – and that can easily go to our heads. We can start to think that the members of the church don’t have anything to say to me, because God called me. Pride can cause me to neglect my ministry, to neglect my family, to think that I don’t sin the same way that you do. If I’m guilty of that sinful pride, I don’t deserve the privilege of serving the Lord, here or anywhere else. More than that, I don’t deserve to live with his saints in heaven when the time comes. I deserve hell.

But members can struggle with God’s call, too. Do you honor your pastors and your teachers as gifts that God has given you here at Peace? Do you love them and encourage them to stand firm in the word of God? Do you counsel them and help them when they wrestle with hard choices in the ministry? Do you freely forgive them when they repent? Do you support their ministry with your offerings? You promised to do all those things when every pastor or teacher God has ever sent you was installed here. Do you live up to your word? If you don’t, you don’t deserve the blessing of having the ministry of the word here. If you don’t, you don’t deserve the eternal life God sent all those people to proclaim to you.

But the ministry is not about what we deserve. It’s about what God has given us. For us pastors and teachers who are never perfect, and for us members who are never perfect, for all of us here today, Jesus came. Jesus came and he was the perfect pastor that I will never be and the perfect teacher that our faculty will never be. He proclaimed the law and the gospel without fail or flinching or mistake. He did it in our place. Jesus came and he was also the perfect member that none of us will ever be. He loved the workers God sent him. He prayed for them and supported them and encouraged them. He lived a perfect life in our place so that now God sees you and me as perfect pastors and teachers and members. And he laid down his life to pay for all that sin and pride that deserves all that hell. He suffered hell itself when his Father abandoned him on the cross. He paid all that we sinners owe. Then he rose and God declared that all our sin is gone forever. He rose and God promised us eternal life. And God sent us pastors and teachers to declare that truth and nothing else. God called us. **A call from God changes your life. A called worker owes allegiance to the Lord.**

II.

Because he owes his allegiance to the Lord, he lives a different life than he would’ve lived otherwise. Now I don’t mean that he would’ve lived a sinful life. God calls members to the exact same standard of holiness that he calls pastors and teachers to. But serving in the ministry means turning your back on other kinds of life. When I was growing up, my mother wanted me to be a doctor. I don’t know if she’s ever going to get over her disappointment at the path that I chose. I wonder what Elisha’s parents wanted for him? He was clearly a wealthy man. When Elijah came to him, he was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen. That’s 24 total animals. These were not cheap animals to buy or to feed. But they were the tractors of their day. Having twenty-four of them meant that you could farm a lot more ground than most people could – if you could afford the hands to operate them all.

Elisha left all that behind to be a servant. Did you notice that? Right at the end of the text, Elisha became Elijah’s attendant. He didn’t get to head right out to his own parish. He spent time learning and serving Elijah. How long did that go on? I don’t know. When Elisha finally became a prophet in his own

right, local children mocked him for being bald. Now, some of us started to go bald in our twenties, so I don't know how much that tells us. But he was clearly an adult for some time before he finally served on his own.

God calls his workers to be servants. Servants of the word, first of all. But also servants of his people. God calls us to have a humble attitude – and the devil loves to tempt us to pride. God often calls pastors and teachers to accept a lower standard of living than they might have had otherwise. Public school teachers make far more money than our teachers do and very few of them have coaching and other duties outside the classroom like we expect our teachers to. Pastors spent eight years in college and at the seminary. Other people do that, too, but we call most of them doctors. Now, I'm not complaining. God has been good to me and my family. But God does call pastors and teachers to serve and in our society, that often means less money and a simpler lifestyle than many members of our churches enjoy.

Most pastors and teachers struggle with the way their congregations treat them, at least sometimes. Sometimes, we're guilty of sinful pride. Sometimes we forget that we are servants. We expect better than we deserve. Again, we don't deserve the privilege of proclaiming God's Word. But sometimes, God's people forget that God calls them to treasure their pastors and teachers. Sometimes, God's people bring as an offering whatever they have left over after they've spent all they wanted on something else. And they expect their pastors and teachers to go another year without a raise and not to complain about it. Sometimes God's people just don't like the servants God sends them – and it would never occur to them to pray for those workers, let alone roll up their sleeves and help them and sacrifice for their good, just as their pastors and teachers have sacrificed for those members.

We all sin. But always our God forgives us. Always the blood of Christ covers us. Always God sees Jesus when he looks at a believer. God has forgiven you and he has forgiven me. Now God calls us to give him glory with our lives. If you are a member, thank God for your pastors and teachers. Support them. Pray for them. Help them, even if you're never going to be best friends with them. God gave them to you. God changed their lives so that you will benefit. If you are called to preach and teach, do it humbly, serving God and being grateful for all that he gives you. **A call from God changes your life. A called worker puts service above personal gain.**

Someone once said to me, "You WELS pastors and teachers don't really have a call." He went on to say that his Baptist sister had a real call, but we don't, because she felt it. But a call from God isn't a feeling. Elisha was plowing when Elijah came up and threw his cloak around him. God works through the church to call men and women to do his work. Sometimes, it happens so quietly that the man or woman doesn't even realize where God is taking them until they get there. But God changes our lives and sends us to serve him by serving you. Be grateful to God for the servants he gives you. Show that gratitude by the way that you support and work with them. Amen.