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“Lord, I Want To Be A Positive Deviant”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth
Genesis 12: 1-9, Psalm 29, Matthew 9: 9-13

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We interrupt this program for late-breaking news:

a silver alert has been issued by local law enforcement

for an elderly man, his wife, and their young nephew,

who have wandered away from their home,

their land, and their people,

seemingly in a state of disorientation.

The couple is said to be in their 70's, and answer to the names

of Abram and Sarai. The nephew goes by Lot.

They were last seen crossing the state line, going south,

with all of their possessions.

They are vulnerable because of their age, and may be in grave danger.

Should you spot them, please notify local authorities

so they can be picked up and returned to where they belong.

Isn't that how we might respond to Abram and Sarai today:

as two vulnerable elderly adults who have lost their minds,

and who have wandered away from where they belong?

And what about Matthew, the tax-collector?

Likewise, might we not issue a missing person's report,

for this successful young businessman who just walks off the job
and disappears into a crowd behind someone
who identifies himself by the single moniker, Jesus.

We'd think Matthew had lost his mind, too; lost his marbles;

lost his bearings; come unhinged.

We'd think they were sick, the whole lot of them,

for stepping out of what would be considered good lives;
for letting go of what the world would consider to be lucrative careers,
and following callings heard only by them,
issued only for them to hear. "Leave." "Get you going." "Follow me."

Today, we might tell our young people

who have just graduated from high school,

Abi, Sharron, Ellery, Joyceline, Ben, Jeremy, and Annie,

as well our older graduates, Catherine, Patrick, Maddie,

Luke, Sherry, Rob, and Mike, to "follow their bliss".

I see this all the time on cards, gifts, mugs and posters: Follow Your Bliss.

But what if your bliss were to follow God's call, or to follow Jesus?

What if your bliss were to leave your home, your family, your familiar turf
and go to a God-chosen locale?

What if your bliss were to leave behind a pricey education,

awards, accolades, on-the-job-training and life experience,
to step away from the billable hours

and to follow Jesus into the milling crowd?

I don't ever remember that being presented as an option in my young life,
and I grew up firmly planted in the church.

I don't remember a theology of call taking precedence in my upbringing;

a theology that beckoned me to step outside the lines of expectation.

What I do remember was a theology of morality being preached;

a theology that insisted that I trust and obey, color within the lines,
and live within the parameters of societal expectation.

I could sum it up with a line repeated frequently by one of my-less educated
baby sitters when I was a child:

“If you *bees* a good girl, I’ll bring you a treat.”

Meaning: if you stay close to home, if you don’t make waves, if you obey the
rules, if you study hard to become a nurse or a teacher, if you marry well,
if you take good care of your children, if you honor your parents into their old
age, then, surely, you will reap your just reward.

That is why I love these call stories;

these alternative narratives that provide a powerful counterbalance
to a theology of morality;

these narratives that mess with our neat little minds;

these narratives that redefine what it means to “be good”;

these narratives that make Harrison Ford playing Indiana Jones at age 65

look like a young light-weight, next to 75- year-old Abram and Sarai;

these narrative that turn wellness and sickness head over heels,

and ask if the doctor is in for those who DON’T run off to follow Jesus.

A wandering Aramean was my ancestor.

“Leave.” “Get you going.” “Follow me.”

I recently finished an intriguing book written by a Harvard doctor,

Atul Gawande, called *Better: A Surgeon’s Notes on Performance*.

Gawande explores how some doctors have striven

to improve the practice of medicine,

and to close the gap between best intentions and actual performance

in the face of some astonishing societal impediments.

One of his stories is of Viennese obstetrician Ignac Semmelweis,

who in 1847 deduced that doctors not washing their hands

were consistently to blame for childbed fever,
the leading cause of maternal death in childbirth
in the days before antibiotics.

At the time, his hospital in Vienna was experiencing
a 20 percent maternal mortality rate due to streptococcal infections.
By mandating that doctors and nurses on his ward scrub with a nail brush
and chlorine between patients, Semmelweis managed to lower the
death rate from 20 percent to 1 percent.

Yet elsewhere, doctors' practices of hand-washing did not change.

And some of his colleagues, offended by his suggestion
that they actually might be killing their patients
by practicing haphazard hygiene,
ultimately saw to it that Semmelweis be dismissed from his job.

They thought he was nuts, and they dismissed him as such.

It was not until his cause was picked up twenty years later by Joseph Lister,
and presented in a clearer, more persuasive way,
that antiseptics in surgery came to the forefront
as a serious consideration for public health.

Dr. Gawande calls people like Semmelweis "positive deviants":

people who are willing to deviate from a norm

in order to effect positive change;

people who are willing to break away from the locally accepted "wisdom"

in all sorts of ways to take part in grand life experiments;

people who are willing to defy the gravity of what seems safest,

and resist doing what everyone else is doing,

in order to risk bringing life-saving change into the world.

And I read Dr. Gawande's book with its premise of becoming **better**

at the practice of medicine through positive deviance,

and I wondered if we also might become **better** at our practice of faith

through similar positive deviance.

And I thought specifically about Abram, Sarai, Lot and Matthew,
and their response to God's call.

"Leave." "Get you going." "Follow me."

"What does it take to be good at something

in which failure is so easy, so effortless?" Gawande asks.

(Gawande. *Better*. P. 3)

We know that feeling, don't we, in the faith,

where the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

And yet, I wondered if these alternative narratives, these call stories,

which redefine what it means to "be good" in God's eyes,

are our stories of positive deviance for God.

Lord, I want to be a positive deviant for You. How do I do that?

In living with these two call stories,

one in the Old Testament and one in the New Testament,

I want to make three suggestions

for how one might become a positive deviant for God.

All three suggestions assume that God wants to make contact with us,

to be in relationship with us, calling out to us, through Scripture,
prayer, music, through the voices of others, through experiences in life.

And that God is eliciting us to respond with our lives, with our deeds,

with our words, to these God-initiatives.

We love, because God first loved us.

And, all three suggestions assume our ability to listen for God

and to respond to what God is calling us to be and do,

both as individuals and as a community of faith.

My first suggestion is this:

Listen and respond to God with faithful curiosity.

Scripture does tell us that Abram heard God's voice:

God's request to leave and get going,

and God's promise of blessing, progeny, land and greatness.

We know that Abram heard it, although at age 75,

Abram could have been hard of hearing.

But we know he heard God because Abram left, as directed,

picked up his family and all of his possessions and took off

in the direction God was suggesting.

And we know that Matthew heard Jesus' simple command to follow,

because he likewise picked up and left the money on the table.

But what scripture doesn't tell us is how they processed God's call internally.

And I have to imagine that they, for the most part, processed God's call

with unbridled curiosity.

Where is this land that you want us to go to?

Can I take my dog along?

Who's going to take care of Mom while we're gone?

Who's going to pay the bills?

We are old. How long will it take us to get there?

Is this a now or never call, or will you ask me again later?

I had a friend who once thought he heard God calling him to a simpler lifestyle.

So he tried to see how few items he could maintain in his possession

and still live adequately.

He was single, of course, at the time;

a one-time used car salesman in Mississippi;

not the type you would imagine to walk off the car lot

and follow Jesus into the Mississippi delta. But he did.

I think he pared his life down to eight or so items, or categories of items

that he deemed essential: a bowl; a fork; a cup; a pencil; some paper;

some clothes; a comb; a toothbrush and a few toiletry items.

Most of us thought he was nuts at the time;

that he was having some kind of mid-life crisis.

But in our American culture of having and hoarding,

of buying and accumulating,

I would say that he was being a positive deviant for God:

someone who listened to God's call,

and who tried a great life experiment of putting into practice

what he thought he heard God telling him to do.

To listen to God's call and respond with faithful curiosity,

means to meet God with curious wonder,

and to entertain all questions in God's presence.

I hope that the new officers whom we have recently elected to serve

this congregation, are listening and responding to God's call

with this unbridled sense of curiosity.

What positive changes can I make in the life of this congregation?

Whom will I meet that I haven't met before?

What small task of service can I take on to model Jesus' servant ministry?

The horse is out of the gate: I wonder where it's taking me?

My second suggestion is this:

Listen and respond to God without reservation.

As Martin Luther once said, "Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life, also."

None of these call recipients questioned their qualification

to be instruments of God's initiative.

They certainly could have tried to recuse themselves, to disqualify themselves

with self-deprecating lines like:

"I'm too old. Certainly someone younger would be more likely,

more able, to go the distance."

"I have a wife and a family to think about.

Wouldn't someone with less baggage be easier to use?"

"I'm a tax-collector. Everyone hates me.

Wouldn't you rather have a popular person on your team?"

But the greatest line of resistance to God's call, then and now, I think, is:

"I'm not worthy because I've made some terrible mistakes in life;

God, wouldn't you rather pick someone with a better track record?"

But, apparently the better track record is not a prerequisite

for being a positive deviant for God.

Perhaps you will recall Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector,

where the Pharisee stands and boasts of all his good deeds,

in contrast to those of robbers, evildoers, and adulterers,

saying, "God, I thank you that I'm not like them."

And he is directly juxtaposed to a tax collector, like Matthew,

who stands at a distance, looking to heaven, beating his breast,

saying, "God, have mercy on me a sinner." (Luke 18: 9-14)

Which one does Jesus choose to honor:

The one with the good track record;

or the one who is flawed but willing to be used by God?

The author of the book of Hebrews says,

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses,

let us throw off everything that hinders

and the sin that so easily entangles,

and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus,

the author and perfecter of our faith". (Hebrews 12: 1-2a)

Listen and respond to God without reservation.

And lastly:

Listen and respond to God with hope.

There is no negative thread to either of these call stories.

Abram turns away from his former life to investigate

this specific utterance of promise from God's own mouth.

The imperative to leave shades into a promise of vast proportion:

"I will, I will, I will, I will, I will," this majestic God vows five times
to these mere mortal human beings, these creatures,
who are a little lower than the heavenly beings.

Abram and Sarai's faithful positive deviance will culminate

in all the families of the earth being blessed through them.

Who could not tolerate a few moving inconveniences and blisters,

with a promise of that magnitude just beyond the horizon?

"Leave." "Get you going." "Follow me."

And Matthew, likewise, expresses not one iota of negativity

in stepping out to become a positive deviant for Jesus.

When the Great Physician writes a prescription that will make him better,

to bless all the families of the earth through him,

Matthew jumps at the chance to have it filled.

When the Great Physician offers the hope of merciful restoration,

of promised blessing and of purpose in life,

Matthew is glad to sacrifice what he has had, for what will be.

"Leave." "Get you going." "Follow me."

Lord, we want to be a positive deviants, like Abram, Sara, Lot and Matthew.

Lord, we are listening. Lord, we are willing.

How are you calling us to serve You? Amen.