

“Vocation through the Seasons of the Church Year”

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A Plenary Address at the
2004 FTE Congregational Partners Conference
Dallas, Texas ▫ September 14, 2004

Again, I want to thank you for being here. You've given precious days to this work – perhaps, you've taken vacation days from your job, or you're here during the first days in your congregation's fall programming. Perhaps you'll go home to meet a whole new confirmation class and you hope your lecture will keep their attention. For making this time a priority, I want thank you all.

As you've heard, I came to the FTE after 22 years of parish ministry – an associate pastor in Iowa City, co-pastor in Minneapolis, Senior Pastor in Moorhead, Minnesota, across the river to Fargo, ND. I loved the ministry – oh, not every day, not every week – but, on the whole, it was a remarkable calling.

Now, I have this amazing adventure of working with people like you as we seek to encourage young people to think deeply and creatively and faithfully – within community – about God's direction in their lives – with the hope that some might sense God's call to pastoral ministry.

However, our hope is that the emphasis on vocation will not simply be a program that congregations tack on to their already long list of programs – but, rather, we hope that vocational conversation becomes a part of the culture – integrated into the whole ministry of a community.

For, at its best, vocational discernment goes with the life of discipleship. And we at FTE believe that NO person of faith, no disciple of Christ, should go through life without deep and significant conversation about God's calling in their lives. To be sure, the church's understanding of vocation isn't just about a job, an occupation. One's calling or vocation “includes occupation, but it also includes our other roles and responsibilities.... It is perfectly possible for children or (the) unemployed or retired persons to...have callings....God calls us wherever we are, including our occupations, but not only there.”ⁱ

So, for many people, the deepest sense of vocation may not be what they do for a living. They may work at a parking garage, but sense God's deepest calling in their work tutoring kids at an inner city school. They may spend their days at a factory, but sense a deeper calling in providing a faithful home for their children.

Still, how people spend their daily lives – that is a profound issue of discipleship. And the church needs to facilitate intentional conversation about this. We need to make vocational discernment a central part of a congregation's mission. The World Council of Churches

understood this back in 1948, when its charter included the words: “Lay people and women spend the greater part of their lives in their homes, their occupations and the public life of the community. It is essential that the church take note of this....Only by the witness of a spiritually intelligent laity can the Church meet the modern world in its actual perplexities and life situations....The question to be faced...is...how can members of the Church be enabled to see the bearing of their Christian faith on their life in their occupation? (Now) They are left to their own wits, which means that they largely live a life divided into two separate compartments, resulting in frustration and the weakening of spiritual vitality.”ⁱⁱ Not much has changed since 1948, if we believe William Diehl who writes in his 1991 book, *The Monday Connection*, that, though the church wanted him to serve as a disciple in the world, it gave him no help to do it. Instead, the church gave lots of help for jobs **inside** the church, like SS teacher, council member, including affirmation, training and even prayers.ⁱⁱⁱ

As I've been thinking about how to make vocational discernment a more integral part of congregational life, I am mindful that, week in and week out, most Christians experience the Sunday morning gathering as the one consistent time for formation and growth in their faith. So, I've been wondering: Is there a way we could become more intentional about incorporating vocational conversation into Sunday morning worship? Certainly, we can pray for our members in their various responsibilities – as parents, friends, spouses, citizens, in their jobs and volunteer service. Some churches even invite worshipers to bring a symbol of their daily work – a stethoscope, a syllabus, a laptop computer – so that the church can visualize these ministries in the world and pray for its members in their work. Perhaps, you have additional ideas.

I also believe that the themes of the church year provide rich resources for vocational discernment. Oh, I know that our different faith traditions approach church seasons differently; still, I believe we all share the same scriptural themes – and the themes have much to say about vocational discernment.

This morning, I invite us to explore texts from the six basic seasons – Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter and Pentecost. Actually, I first thought about looking at the lessons for the 52 Sundays in the coming year, Year A of the Revised Common Lectionary, but I think I'll be lucky if you stick with me through 6 seasons!

So, let's get started: Does Advent have anything to offer in the journey of vocational discernment? Do Christmas and Epiphany? I need to make a disclaimer at this point, because the overwhelming risk if you work at the FTE, is that you'll find vocation everywhere you look. Someone was just telling me, “Ann, have you thought about that movie *The Lion King*? It's all about vocation!” So, if I see more than is truly there in the texts, please stop me.

Advent – one of my favorite seasons of the year – the four Sundays before Christmas. You can almost hear Handel's *Messiah*, helping Isaiah's words come to life: “Comfort, comfort ye, my people. He shall feed his flock, like a shepherd.” You can almost see the pictures of peace that Isaiah paints: “The wolf shall lie down with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and a little child shall lead them....They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks, nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. The eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped, The lame

shall leap like a deer and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert...and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

And, then, on the cusp of Christmas eve, the prophet Mary proclaims, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly, God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

Advent weaves a vision of the future – a vision of God’s promised shalom – God’s healing and wholeness for creation. And, perhaps, the first step in vocational discernment is the development of such a vision of how the world could be. The first step in vocational discernment is a healthy imagination – the ability to picture the fruits of justice and peace – to imagine that peaceable kingdom – a world made whole.

And, the future envisioned by Isaiah and Mary is pretty concrete, pretty practical. They get right down to the details. Beating swords into plowshares – turning instruments of death into instruments of life. Lifting up the lowly. Filling the hungry. Healing the blind and the lame. These are real changes. Advent is a season of hope, of vivid imagination – a time to preach in pictures – like Isaiah – painting a world of God’s kingdom on earth. For, you see, as soon as you preach it, it begins to break into the present. As soon as you pray the Lord’s prayer, you are praying that the kingdom you can only imagine, the healing you can only dream, will somehow break into the world today. It was Jurgen Moltmann who said, “Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, for the good of the promised future stabs...into the flesh of every unfulfilled present.”

In Advent, we imagine anew God’s dream of wholeness for the world. We begin to glimpse places where the vision is actually breaking into our lives. And, perhaps, we even begin to sense that we could be participants in the coming reign of God.

But, such hope and imagination isn’t always enough. Nagging doubts start creeping in: Me, a peacemaker? A co-worker with God? I’m just a human, just one person. How can God use me?

And, then we gather for Christmas.

“Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of great joy for all people – to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord.”“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.”

Just as we begin to doubt whether God can really use us as agents of God’s justice and peace, it’s Christmas, and we stand in awe of that which God uses to accomplish God’s purposes. This is the season of the incarnation – when the God of all creation takes on human flesh. Indeed, God uses the most vulnerable creation, a tiny baby, to work God’s purposes. Christmas is the season of wild possibilities. For if the God of the universe can become enfleshed in a wrinkled, reddened newborn, then nothing is impossible. Then, God might even be able to use me.

Indeed, Luther's concept of the priesthood of all believers really grew out of his theology of the incarnation. *Finitum capax infiniti*, he wrote. The finite is bearer of the infinite. If God, the infinite, is truly present in a tiny, finite, baby, God can also be present bread and wine, God can be present in you, in me. Indeed, the NT was very quick to speak of the church as the body of Christ – the incarnation of Christ in the world.

Yes, with beauty and color and detail, Advent helps us imagine God's dream to heal the world. And then, Christmas proclaims that God has taken on human flesh to make that dream a reality – to bring life and salvation. And, if God can become incarnate in Jesus, then perhaps, God can be present in the church – God can be present in you and me as members of Christ's body. Christmas is the season of wild possibilities – that, yes, God can use us to bring life and love to earth.

Which brings us to Epiphany – that season where we're called to step out in faith – trusting God's promise to be present in us – to use our lives for good. Epiphany begins with the journey of the magi, one of my favorite stories in scripture, so full of suspense and wonder – Gentiles trusting a star to guide them, asking help from scholars in Jerusalem, bringing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, such rich symbols about the ministry of Christ.

It's an amazing story – an amazing journey. In my congregations, we would often host an Epiphany festival – and invite the kids to go on the magi's journey. We'd place clues throughout the church: "You see the biggest star you can imagine – and to follow it's light." "You run into a sandstorm and have to stay put." "You need water for the camels, so you take a detour toward an oasis." "You're warned in a dream to return home by another way." The kids get a sense of the suspense, the wonder of the journey.

And, they get a sense of the faith of those wise men. They drop everything to search for a savior. They face the dangers of the wilderness, the dangers of Herod's court. They walk by faith, willing to risk, willing to trust. Later in Epiphany we read about the call of the disciples – recorded in all four gospels – and whatever the account, I'm always amazed. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus simply says: "Follow me," and that's what they do. Peter and Andrew, James and John drop everything to follow Jesus: fish and fishing nets, boats and hired men, they even leave their father, Zebedee. It's astonishing.

In a way, Epiphany invites us to look at our own lives, to compare our own journey with that of the wise men, with that of the first disciples, and to ask what risks we're willing to take, what faith do we put in God's promise to lead us. Am I willing to follow a star? To follow a rabbi from Nazareth? Even if I don't have all the answers, am I willing to take the first step in faith?

Advent paints a picture of God's dream to heal the world. Christmas proclaims that God can use finite human beings as agents of that healing. And, Epiphany invites us to step forth in faith, to trust that God will lead us, to risk enough to follow. Oh, this doesn't mean we'll always get it right. We know how the first disciples often got it wrong. They stumbled and fell, made wrong turns, got lost in fear doubt and fear. It's not about being perfect. It's about being faithful.

Vocational discernment is also a stepping out in faith. We may sense that God is calling us to help heal the world through ministry or medicine or business or engineering – and then we

realize how long the journey's gonna take just to learn the job: college applications, acceptances, rejections, student loans, internships, mentoring, interviewing for the job. Maybe later, we find that it wasn't the right job, wasn't the right fit. Sometimes we have to turn around and start over. Yes, the vocational journey can be as suspenseful and complicated as magi trying to follow a star, caught in sandstorms, avoiding Herod's trap, going home by another way. We don't get a script – a detailed blueprint, directions from Mapquest. Still, we step out in faith, we try some things, we move forward, we trust in the promise and presence of God.

Advent paints a picture of God's dream to heal the world. Christmas opens the possibility that God can use us, finite human beings as agents of healing. Epiphany invites us to step forth in faith. And, Lent, well, Lent is honest about the fact that it's not always gonna be easy. Oh, Lent and Easter form the center of the year – the center of the Christian faith. Christ's death and resurrection are the foundation of our faith, the source of our salvation. There is so much more here that wisdom for vocational discernment, and I would never advocate for that sort of reduction. Still, there is vocational wisdom – a great deal of it.

Lent points us to the cross. And, in each of the synoptic gospels, Jesus calls the disciples to follow him in taking up the cross: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Bonhoeffer puts it rather bluntly, "When Christ says, "follow me," he bids us come and die."

You see, Jesus didn't sugar coat the way of discipleship. Lent is a time for honesty – for truth telling about the path of discipleship – the path of vocational faithfulness. If we follow Jesus, we'll encounter struggles and suffering. For, the one who leads us isn't in sync with the values of the world. And, when we follow Jesus, we'll surely encounter those opposing values – those powers and principalities – the rampant isms at work in our world: materialism individualism, hedonism, racism, sexism, nationalism, pragmatism. And these aren't easy encounters, they're not always fun experiences. Yes, Lent is a time for honesty about the struggle of faithfulness. It's not all joy and wonder – even if you're in the right vocation – even if you're in the place where God calls you. That's why I sometimes think we can misunderstand Buechner's definition – "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." It's not all gladness – even if you're in the right place. Sometimes, it's just hard work. Genesis 3 makes it pretty clear that, this side of the fall, work won't always be a joy ride.

Last night, Melissa spoke about the question of shopping. It reminded me of my own 23 year old daughter, who, earlier this year, asked me, "Mom, will I always have to struggle when I go shopping? Will I always have to think about how the money I spend on clothes is money I'm not giving to work for justice?" And, part of me wanted to say, Yes, I hope you always struggle with it. Following Jesus will mean struggle. It will mean forever resisting the idolatries of the culture – being in but not of the world.

Yet, John's gospel, hints at how joy and struggle might co-exist in the path of discipleship. He writes, "When a woman is in labor, she is sad that her hour has come. But once the baby is born, her joy makes her forget the suffering, because a child has been born into the world. So it is with you." Indeed, the chapter closes with the same Greek word addressed to the disciples:

In the world you face persecution/experience birth pangs, but have courage, I have overcome the world – I will bring forth life to the world.

When our struggles are for the sake of life, when they're like birth pangs, then mixed in, deep and profound, is a spirit of joy. Maybe that's the deep gladness that Buechner was talking about. Maybe that's how joy and struggle are held together. It doesn't mean that the pain is any less. But deep within and under the pain is the joy of working to bring new life.

Advent paints a picture of God's dream to heal the world. Christmas opens the possibility that God can use us, finite human beings as agents of healing. Epiphany invites us to step forth in faith. Lent is honest about the struggles, the suffering we will face. And, Easter, well, Easter makes sure we know that suffering is not the final word.

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live."
"We have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." The message of the resurrection is that God holds the future – and the future means life. Some months ago, we asked a group of pastors: why is good pastoral ministry important? One answer has stuck with me: Good ministry is important because the church is the only place with this message: the only death that really matters has already taken place. You have died with Christ in baptism. In baptism, you were joined to the risen One – the One who has overcome death.

It is that message of unconditional love and security, which frees us to truly live – abundantly – creatively – without the fear that our world and our nation seem to thrive on. The culture would have us live in fear – of illness, of crime, of strangers, of death. But, if the only death that really matters has already taken place, we can throw ourselves into this life. For we know that life has the last word – eternal life in Christ. As Helmut Theileke put it: If you don't need to be anxious about your last hour, you don't need to be anxious about the next moment. Secure in Christ, you can live this day – this hour – this moment in freedom and joy – in the fullness of life. That is the gospel word that frees us to risk all sorts of possibilities when it comes to vocation. We are set free to risk poverty, hard work, isolation, even death – for we know that Christ has overcome death.

Advent paints a picture of God's dream to heal the world. Christmas opens the possibility that God can use us, finite human beings as agents of healing. Epiphany invites us to step forth in faith. Lent is honest about the struggles, the suffering we'll face. And, Easter, well, Easter makes sure we know that suffering doesn't have the last word. We are set free from fear and despair, for we know that nothing in all of creation – nothing we'll ever face – can separate us from the victorious love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

There's a lot to take in through the first five seasons – Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent. Maybe that's why we have half of the year observing Pentecost – we need some ordinary days, ordinary time, to ponder all that we've heard in the first half of the year. But, the Pentecost story, reminds us not to ponder it alone. We need each other – we need companions for this journey of faith and vocation. And, we don't just need Christians who are like us – we need the whole, diverse, complicated and multi-colored family of God.

I'm always surprised by the Pentecost story. God's dream to proclaim salvation could've been accomplished in a much simpler way. When Peter began to preach to that crowd gathered from every nation, God could've just made sure that each person understood Aramaic, just provided the ability to understand Peter's language. Instead, God translated the message. Each person heard in their own language. There was true communication even amidst a whole diversity of languages. God didn't create one common language, but enabled all to communicate across their diversity.

That's a powerful affirmation of the folks we need along for the ride of discipleship, of vocational faithfulness – not just the kind that pat us on the back and say, “you'll make a good pastor,” but also the ones who ask the tough questions, who challenge and prod and love us enough to stick with us in honesty and compassion.

Yes, Advent sparks the imagination with a picture of God's dream to heal the world. Christmas opens the possibility that God can use us, finite human beings as agents of healing. Epiphany invites us to step forth in faith. Lent is honest about the struggles we'll face. Easter sets us free to live and serve, for we know that Life has the final word. And, Pentecost places us smack dab in the middle of a diverse and lively host of companions – fellow travelers on the road of vocational faithfulness.

After I'd served as a pastor in Minneapolis for a few years, I had an amazing conversation with a parishioner. A young woman came up to me after worship one Sunday, shook my hand and said, “I quit my job last week.” Surprised, I asked, “Why?” “Well,” she said, “I've been listening to your sermons.”

Now, I wasn't just surprised, I was scared. Could preaching God's word make that kind of difference – leading a bright, gifted, successful woman to leave a six-figure income and her prestigious position at a major advertising agency?

“Actually,” she continued, “I was being asked to develop a campaign to get 4th-6th grade kids hooked on caffeinated sodas. I just didn't think that's what God wanted me to do with my life.”

Yes, God speaks to vocation in Sunday worship. God speaks to and shapes our whole lives of discipleship. Jesus calls us to follow him in lives of discipleship. Our relationship with Christ changes and touches everything -- including our vocations.

Oh, the lessons of the church year are deeper and richer than anything I've said today – there's enough depth for a lifetime of exploration and growth. Still, I believe God's Word speaks profoundly to vocation.

Throughout the church year, week in and week out, in Sunday worship, Jesus meets us, to make us whole, and to send us out as called people, living in vocation, partners with God in healing the world.

ⁱ See Marc Kolden, “Vocation, Work, and Identity and the Church's Mission,” *Word and World*, Fall 1989, p. 368.

ⁱⁱ Quoted in presentation: “Christianity and the Meaning of Work,” Lake Lambert, Wartburg College, Waverly, Iowa.

ⁱⁱⁱ William Diehl, *The Monday Connection*, Harper Collins, 1991