

“It Wasn’t on the Agenda”

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

5th Sunday of Easter

May 18, 2025

Westminster, Greenville

Ben Dorr

During the birthday BBQ luncheon that’s taking place right after our worship service today, 78th birthday of our church, there will be a brief—and let me emphasize brief—report from the Connect, Serve, Grow Task Force.

You will recall that this Task Force was charged by the Session back in February, 2024 to help the Session answer the question:

“Who is God calling Westminster to be in the next 10 years?”

Where is God leading us?

What are the next steps that God wants us to take?

The Task Force did outstanding work, and I want to take this opportunity to publicly thank them. Their report, which they made to the Session back in March, was outstanding.

If you’re not going to be able to make it to the luncheon, do not despair...when I’ve returned from sabbatical, and we begin our program year together in the fall, we’ll kick off the Sunday School year with one adult class on September 7, and the Connect, Serve, Grow Task Force will lead that class, with more time for questions and discussion.

In the meantime, the Session is moving forward with recommendations from the Task Force...for example, this summer there’s going to be a facilities assessment. It will help us answer the question of whether we can expand our space for, say, the Weekday School, which has over 600 names on its waiting list. Is there a way to build a small chapel here on our campus?

We don't know...but if we had one, we could use it for small weddings and small funerals.

And the Connect, Serve, Grow Task Force—in good Presbyterian fashion—has also recommended the creation of two NEW Task Forces...one for stewardship, one for learning more about the needs of our neighbors here in Greenville...but I'm getting ahead of myself.

My point in sharing this with you is to let you know that plans are in the works.

We are taking intentional steps to help us discern what God is calling Westminster to do.

Who God is calling Westminster to be.

Which brings us to the topic of today's sermon:

The topic is call.

What does it mean to be called by God?

In our two scripture passages for this morning, we heard two VERY different stories about call.

I'm sure you recognized the first one.

It's one of the most memorable stories in all of scripture.

The road to Damascus.

The blinding light.

It's the call of...the Apostle Paul.

But it's not the first call story Luke describes in the book of Acts.

In the opening chapter, even before the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles at Pentecost, they needed to find someone to replace Judas. Who was God calling to be the 12th apostle?

“So they proposed two,” Luke writes.

“Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and said, ‘Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen...And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.’”

Do you hear the contrast between these two calls?

Paul had a “before & after” experience...knocked to the ground by God, his life was overturned by God.

But Matthias was called...almost like he was the first Presbyterian. He was called during a committee meeting!
Nothing wrong with that.

To put it another way, Matthias was on the early church’s agenda. But the Apostle Paul was on NO ONE’S agenda.

Paul never dreamed that he would end up doing what God what God was calling him to do.

Let me get at it like this.

We’re in the graduation season this year.

Anyone here going to, or recently been at, a high school or college graduation?

Yes. Many of the commencement speeches that are given at this time of year will tell the graduates that they can be whoever they want to be...the future is bright.

Dreams big dreams.

You can be the person you most want to be.

And I get what they're saying...but that's not what the call of God is all about.

We don't get to be whoever we want to be in this life.

Or as one of my colleagues likes to put it, **we are not our own idea.**

We are God's idea.

That's the first thing it means to be called by God.

Think about your own life for a moment.

Has that kind of thing ever happened to you?

Has God ever asked you to do something you never dreamed God would ask you to do?

It was 7 years ago this weekend, I believe—third weekend in May—that y'all called me here to be your next pastor. I've told you before how in January of 2018, moving here was not on my family's agenda.

But then I got a phone call on Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend from the PNC...and I told Heather about it, and I said, "Don't worry. We're not moving to Greenville, South Carolina."

Famous last words, right?

One thing led to another, and by May of 2018, we were convinced this was where God wanted us to be. Seven years later, we are so grateful that God INTERVENED—and put something new on our agenda.

Do you see how it works?
Call isn't just for preachers.
Call is for everyone—for each of you.

What you do with your life...or during a season of your life...it's not about your agenda. It's about discerning God's agenda for you.

The writer and actor Kate Susong tells what it was like to care for her dying mother-in-law.

Back in 2014, her husband's mother, Adrienne, received a terminal diagnosis...the doctors didn't know whether it would be a matter of months, or maybe a year, and Kate felt a strong call to take care of Adrienne, during the last season of her life.

But things didn't go as planned.
One year turned into two turned into four.
Kate and her husband moved Adrienne into their house with them.

And the experience of taking care of Adrienne day in and day out, year after year—it began to wear on Kate.

After an argument at the family dinner table one evening, Kate sat with her mother-in-law the next morning, trying to convince Adrienne to take her pills.

“Usually, I said, ‘You have to take them, Adrienne—they’re keeping your lungs clear so you can breathe!’

But that morning felt different.

Kate says she looked at her mother-in-law, and when Adrienne complained about taking her pills, Kate replied: ‘Well, you don’t have to take them if you prefer the alternative.’

“She gave me a ...look and said, ‘I’m not ready to die yet—I’m not ready to stand before God because I have nothing to offer him.’”

This theological slant took Kate a bit by surprise.
But she decided to roll with it.

“You’re not supposed to offer him anything—it’s what he’s done for you that matters,” Kate replied.

“I’ve worked so hard at being good,” Adrienne said.

“Yes,” Kate said to her. “You have lived a good life. You’ve been a foster mother and have helped so many people pay for school and basic needs. You are so generous and have done amazing things!”

“But...I’m afraid it doesn’t outweigh the things I’ve done wrong or the bad things I think and say...I feel like it’s not enough!”

Kate says she paused.
She weighed her response.

“I wondered if I could say this to a dying person,” Kate writes.
And then she realized that six years of waiting had led to this moment.

“You’re right,” Kate replied. “It’s not enough.”

Kate’s mother-in-law was startled.
But Kate plowed on.

“We can never be good enough...But Adrienne, you remember the Good News, right? That God loves you more than you love God? You don’t have to be good enough—Jesus was good enough...When you stand before God...you don’t have to be afraid of anything.”

Two weeks later, Adrienne died.

Kate writes that in the funeral home, “I remembered that the good news of the [gospel] is for me, too...I hadn’t loved Adrienne perfectly—I had merely loved her and often failed...I realized, finally, that my deficit was filled to overflowing [not by any good that I had done, but] by Jesus being good enough for me.”¹

That’s the first thing it means to be called by God.

God has not called you to be a perfect person.
God has called you to be Christ’s person.

And whatever deficits you and I have will be filled to overflowing by the risen Christ.

Which leads me to my second point:
The call of God isn’t ONLY about being Christ’s person.
It’s also about being Christ’s COMMUNITY.

Let’s go back to our two stories for today.
The call of Paul, and the call of Matthias.

¹ Kate Susong, “She’s Dead!”, *Plough*, March 21, 2025.

If you were to read the book of Acts this summer—my wonderful colleagues are preaching a sermon series on Acts this summer—you’ll notice that the Apostle Paul DOMINATES the second half of the book.

But what about the Apostle Matthias?

Do you remember what Luke tells us happened next with Matthias?

That silence in this room...is precisely the right answer.

After the opening chapter of Acts, Luke never mentions Matthias again!

Now...did Luke forget about Matthias?

Was he saying that the early church made a mistake when they called Matthias?

No.

I think Luke’s point is precisely the opposite.

By mentioning Matthias, Luke is reminding us that even though he wrote a lot about Paul, the early church wasn’t all about Paul.

It was about EVERYONE who made up that community.

It was about Tabitha and Timothy,

Barnabas and Lydia,

Silas and Rhoda...

and even the Apostle Matthias.

Not one saint.

But a community of saints.

Sam Wells, who years ago served as the Dean of the Chapel at Duke, once remarked on the difference between heroes and saints.

He said, “Stories...with heroes...

are told to laud the...heroes—
for if the hero failed, all would be lost.

By contrast, a saint can fail in a way that the hero can't, because the failure of the saint reveals the forgiveness and the new possibilities made in God...the saint is just a small character in a story that's always fundamentally about God."²

A small character in a story that's always fundamentally about God.

Hmmm...that got me thinking.

Would it be ok with you if I ended this sermon by naming some of the ways I've seen God writing God's story through you?

As I've been planning for my sabbatical, I've also been reflecting some on the past seven years.

A lot has happened, right?

During the past seven years, you have experienced the departure of 5 beloved pastors, and an outstanding Director of Music, and you have graciously welcomed 5 new pastors and a new Director of Music.

You've gone through a world-wide pandemic...and you not only stayed together as a church, but by God's grace, you are thriving and growing as God's church.

In the midst of the pandemic, you made a six-figure gift to Soteria, which provided a house for formerly incarcerated women who are

² As quoted by Jeffrey Overstreet, "Heroes vs. Saints," Response, Seattle Pacific University, found at [Heroes vs. Saints - Response - Seattle Pacific University](#).

getting back on their feet. You've met with them and shared meals with them and spent time with them.

Last fall, when Hurricane Helene hit Greenville, you opened your doors to neighbors whose homes were damaged. There was a wedding here in this sanctuary, on the Saturday after the hurricane, and some of you—even with flooding in your home—were here to help with the wedding. And then others of you came on Sunday, ushering and welcoming visitors so that we could worship together that weekend.

And then you donated food and water and made monetary gifts to those who were hit harder than we were.

In the past 7 years...

You've welcomed over 600 new members to this church.

You've said a temporary goodbye to many beloved saints who have joined the Church Triumphant.

You've taken Witness & Service trips and pilgrimages to the Mexico border, to Cuba, to Scotland, to the DR, to Florida, to Alabama, to Charleston.

You've given countless hours of your time and energy to teaching Sunday School, to going to Sunday School, to serving as an adult youth advisor, to going to Montreat, to teaching and learning at It's Elementary, to singing in one of our choirs, to serving on the Session or a committee or a Task Force.

You've given over \$5 million for the Witness & Service ministries of this church.

You've promised to help raise a child in the Christian faith during that child's baptism...wait for it...250 times!

But it wasn't just you that was doing those things, right?

It was the risen Christ, writing his story through you.

I asked a colleague recently what his sabbatical was like, and he said, well...I was gone for three months, and during that time, my congregation decided to buy a new piece of property.

May I pause here and make a request?
Please don't purchase new property while I'm away...

But then he went on and said—actually, it was a good decision.
The right decision.
It was a decision that wasn't about me, he said.
It was about God.
And who God was calling us to be.

That's why, while I'm grateful to you for the gift of the next three months, grateful to my splendid colleagues for covering my responsibilities this summer, I'm also looking forward to being back in this pulpit with you on August 17th.

Because in the end, it's not about us.
It's about God.

We are all small characters in a story that's fundamentally about God. And when it comes to the next chapter in that story...I can't think of anyone I'd rather be responding to God's call with...then each and every one of you.

Amen.