

Emmanuel Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Pentecost 8

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Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz

God comes calling

—Acts 7:10-15

Don't you find it supremely annoying when your email fills up with spam email, when your US Postal Service mailbox fills up with junk mail, and when your cell phone lights up with phone calls from telemarketers and robocalls? You open your email on your computer, and there it is: You were chosen to be the recipient of a \$50 million dollar bequest. The donor died without an heir, and you were chosen because of your good looks and your winsome smile to be the recipient of all this money. All you need to do is contact the name in the e-mail, do some paperwork for a small fee, and \$50 million will be deposited into the Swiss bank account of your choice. What do you do with the e-mail? Delete! Then you go out to your postal mailbox and get your physical mail, and there's a piece of mail that looks suspiciously similar: promises of easy money with no strings attached. What do you do? You run it through the shredder! Then the next day your phone rings with an unrecognized number. You're ready to let it go to voice mail, but just for laughs you pick it up. The person on the other end addresses you by name and says, "I sent you an e-mail and a letter by snail-mail telling you that you are the recipient of a \$50 million dollar bequest. I wanted to contact you personally and work through the details with you." What do you do? Okay, now there's something weird going on, so you politely ask the caller to put you on their do-not-call list, wish the person a nice day and hang up.

We get these solicitations all the time, don't we? Who would fall for them? We know what to do with them. Delete, shred, block the call—and don't get scammed.

But what if it were real?

I'm serious! Someone has a rich uncle somewhere. Someone has to win the Publishers Clearing House sweepstakes. Just this past week a man in Washington State got a check for a million dollars out of the blue because he was entered into a Washington State government lottery when he got Covid-vaccinated. When they called to tell him he thought it was a scam; he said, "I didn't even know this was a thing." What if your \$50 million offer were a real, legitimate, coming-out-of-nowhere, no-strings-attached, seems-too-good-to-be-true deal that dropped a life-changing opportunity right into your lap? Sounds crazy? It probably is.

But what do you think happens when God comes calling?

Amos was neither a prophet nor a prophet's son. Prophecy was not in his family, and as far as he was concerned it had no place in his future. He was a shepherd, and he took care of sycamore-fig trees. That's all he planned to do; he was happy and content with his vocation. Then the Lord came calling.

In the days of Amos the Prophet, the nation of Israel was split. About 170 years earlier the northern kingdom had rebelled against the king in Jerusalem, the dynasty of King David in the south, and by the time Amos came along the north and the south had been separate kingdoms for almost two centuries. The kings in the north didn't want their people going south to Jerusalem to worship at the temple, so they built a couple of shrines of their own to keep the people close to home. The first rebel king, Jeroboam, built a temple at Bethel (just a little north of Jerusalem, on the south end of his realm) and at Dan (way on the north end), and at each temple he put up a golden calf for the people to worship. (What is it with Israel and these golden calves?) Every single king who followed him was bad. They led the people to worship false gods. They adopted the pagan practices of Baal worship with their hilltop orgies and fertility rituals. Things had reached rock bottom with King Ahab and his wicked wife Jezebel; they took pagan worship to new levels of filth. After Ahab things got a little bit better. The next kings got rid of some of the pagan worship, but they never got rid of those silly golden calves at Bethel and Dan.

During the days of Prophet Amos the northern kingdom reached the height of its power and prosperity. The Israelites were making money hand over fist selling olive oil and wine to Egypt and Assyria, they had conquered Damascus and extended their borders, and now the people were living a life of luxury. They had become haughty and self-centered. The nation's prosperity was built on the backs of the working poor who labored in the fields. There was a widening gap between the haves and the have-nots. The wealthy people went through the motions of worshiping the God of Israel, but there was no compassion, no love, and their rituals did not make up for the lack of real righteousness. And they were still worshiping those golden calves!

Into this scene steps the Prophet Amos calling the people to repent and return to the LORD. There are three big lessons for us from the Prophet Amos. The environment he preached in was very similar to ours today—a thriving economy, self-absorbed people, worship of wealth and pleasure, people testing God’s patience and destruction knocking at the door. We can relate. Amos’ call touches our hearts and goes out to our society: He calls us to repent of our self-indulgence and worship the Lord with our whole heart. God is not mocked, and he does not permit half-hearted devotion. He says in Revelation that he spits lukewarm Christians out of his mouth. Sobering words for us to take seriously!

Second, when Amos told people to repent and return to the Lord, his message met resistance. Instead of repenting, the leaders wanted to throw Amos out. “Shoot the messenger” when you don’t like the message. Amaziah, the priest at Bethel (the guy leading the worship of the golden calf there) said, “Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there. Don’t prophecy anymore at Bethel, because this is the king’s sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom.” It’s so easy for us to do the same: shoot the messenger when we don’t like the message. Someone gently reminds us that we’re sinning, and we say, “Get out of my face! Go preach to someone else!” The pastors or elders of the church call to encourage someone who has been drifting from worship, and people refuse to answer, don’t return calls, try to run and hide. Think about that: a representative who speaks in God’s Name comes in Christian love to gently encourage a closer walk with Christ, and it’s okay to ignore him or blow him off? Those men come calling with a call to repentance and offering the gift of eternal life! They call in the name of Jesus, offering forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. Answer the call! The voice on the other end is none other than the voice of God speaking to you through the lips of a brother in Christ. Anyone can ignore a phone call or a visit from a pastor or an elder of the church, but they won’t be able to ignore God when he calls them to stand in the judgment. And that call will come! Again, an important lesson for us to take seriously!

But the third lesson, the one I really want to press home today, is how Amos he got to be a prophet, because it’s never what he wanted to be. In these times there were schools of the prophets where young men went to study to be prophets (kind of like a seminary); Amos never attended. He was from down south of Jerusalem, from the southern kingdom, and he had no intention of going up north to straighten out those arrogant rebels with their fine horses, their fancy clothes, their chic perfumes, their luxurious homes and their golden calves. Until the Lord came calling, and Amos obeyed the call. This is how the Lord works. He calls the most unlikely of candidates into his family. He calls the most unlikely of candidates to serve him.

Jesus called his disciples. “Follow me,” he said. And they followed him. They left their boats, their toll booths, the livelihoods, and they followed Jesus. When others got tired of following Jesus and turned away, the Twelve continued to follow Jesus. “Lord, to whom shall we go?” asked Peter. “You have the words of eternal life.” He called the Twelve to go through the towns and villages of Galilee to preach that people should repent. He gave them authority to drive out demons and heal the sick. These fishermen and tax collectors never signed up to be preachers. They never went to seminary; they were unschooled men. But Jesus called them out of the blue, and they answered the call. They took up their cross, and they followed him.

What do you think happens when God comes calling?

God has called you. He has not called you to be a prophet or an apostle or a preacher, but he has called you to follow him. You didn’t apply for the position of being a Christian; his call came to you from his grace. He has called you to a high and lofty position as his very own child. Do you understand what that means? It exceeds the grasp of our limited minds! We get a phone call or an e-mail offering an enormous amount of money and we think it’s too good to be true, but Jesus has called you and offered you a whole lot more than the paltry and pathetic sum of \$50 million. In comparison to what Jesus called you to, \$50 million is pocket change, lunch money. We just read in Ephesians what God’s call to you means: He has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. We have been called to be holy and blameless in his sight. In Jesus we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. God chose you, predestined you before the dawn of time to be the special recipient of all the blessings of his love. You and I cannot even begin to imagine what God has planned for us for all eternity! What God has planned for you and for everyone who trusts Jesus, has been bought and paid for by the holy blood of infinite worth of God’s only-begotten Son spilled on the cross. What Jesus bled and died for is given to you as a gift of his grace—a free gift. God’s own Spirit lives in you, calls you his holy temple, and is a down payment and promise of incomprehensibly good things to come. The bliss of heaven is what our loved ones who have died in the faith now enjoy, and what we who remain faithful to the end will soon enjoy with them. All these blessings—more than we can ask or imagine—are yours in Christ Jesus. Because God came calling. Amen.