

“Learning to Pray, and Doing It”!

Pastor Jessie Colwell

“Blessed Wrestling”

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Key Texts: Genesis 32:22-32

For five years I have been blessed to be in ministry with all of you here at Culpeper United Methodist Church. We have laughed together, cried together, prayed for each other, and made disciples together, and on this my final Sunday I want to thank you for loving me, thank you for teaching me, and thank you for being models to me of God’s love.

So today, I take this opportunity to recount God’s calling upon my life which I continue to answer at the Rappahannock Charge, and to encourage you to do the same....to answer God’s calling upon your life.

In the world of United Methodist pastors as we go through the process to become ordained there is a question that we are asked over and over and over again: “What is your call story?” In other words, why in the world did you decide to become a United Methodist Pastor?

For me, God’s calling upon my life is something that continues to evolve. I was called by God to be a pastor at 16 years old while on a mission trip helping rebuild an African American Church that was burned down by the K.K.K. I was called again in the potato fields at Camp Occohonock on the bay at 17 and I was called again when I was a sophomore at Virginia Tech after attending a powerful retreat. God has been pursuing me and calling me for long time and eventually, I relented and embraced the life to which God was calling me to lead.

When I shared this story with my first District Superintendent in Richmond, Virginia he asked me: “What scripture do you think would adequately capture God’s calling upon your life?”

Immediately, I thought of this scripture from Genesis 32:22-32. For in this scripture God pursues us, we wrestle with God, we are changed, and we are blessed. This is my call scripture. This is the one I go back to time and time again and remember and celebrate the calling that God has placed upon my life to preach good news and make disciples.

You may be thinking...well Pastor Jessie...out of the entire Bible this is an interesting passage for you to choose and you would be right. There is so much leading up to this scripture that is vital to be able to understand it fully.

You see in this scripture Jacob has reached his breaking point, he needed to wrestle with God to understand his next steps. Jacob had spent this night alone. He had already sent his family ahead of him and was taking some time to himself before he had to face his older brother.

You see Jacob was in trouble...when he left his hometown his brother wanted to kill him because he had stolen both his birthright and his blessing, something usually given to the oldest son.

Jacob was a twin, the second twin, and when he was born he had grabbed on to the heel of his brother...so even from his birth he wanted everything that rightfully belonged to his brother. To preserve his life, his mother Rebekah sent him to live with her brother. Again, his deceitfulness caused division and ultimately God called him to go home.

So, it is in this journey home that we find Jacob...now Jacob is probably thinking that certain death will await him. So proactively he sends his brother Esau many gifts ahead of him hoping these gifts will be enough to preserve his life.

It is during this night of worry and anxiety that he wrestles with God all night until daybreak. He would not let go of God and God would not let go of him. The fight continued even when God struck Jacob in the hip socket. Jacob would still not relent, he asked God for a blessing. There God gave him a blessing and changed his name to "Israel" which means "God rules or God strives."¹

This was a turning point in Jacob's life and after he wrestled with God, he ultimately got to experience reconciliation with his brother Esau. God preserved his life.

For me this passage relates to my call because I feel that so many times in my life I have had to wrestle with God. Some would call this process discernment. I think this is why I am so passionate about discernment. It is biblical. It is how we wrestle with God to more closely hear what God is calling us to do next. See wrestling with God is not a bad thing, but one thing is for sure. After we wrestle with God we will be changed and we will be blessed.

After I finally applied to seminary and was accepted to Duke. I felt changed. I felt more peaceful. I was finally doing what God had called me to do and I stopped running away from God. I want everyone to experience this peace, the assurance that comes from knowing that you are doing God's will for your life.

Just because you faithfully answer God's calling upon your life does not mean that it will be easy, in fact, ministry is anything but easy, but friends I can tell you with absolute certainty that it is beautiful. We get to share with you your best and worst of days. We get to remind you of the presence of God, when you are not happy with God.

We get to speak encouragement into your life when you are down. We get to challenge you in your faith and asks you how God is calling you.

The good news for all of us today is that God is calling each and every one of us to make disciples. Through the covenant made with God in our baptism, we are all called.

So, what are you saying to God today? Like Jacob through encountering God in a dream in Genesis 31 are you saying, "Here I am!"? Or are you currently in a wrestling match with God? Wherever you are God will not give up on you and you will walk away being changed and blessed.

I love how our church encourages people to answer God's calling upon their lives. This is why I have been so passionate about the Calling 21 program here at Culpeper UMC. We have given five young people the opportunity to discern and discover who God is calling them to be. We are commissioning Stephen Ministers and Disciple 4 Bible Study participants today. These people will take their passion for pastoral care and Bible study and reach countless people all for the glory of God.

Do not be dismayed if you have not yet discovered God's calling up on your life. Sometimes, it is what other people say to us that help us search more deeply. Have you had friends and family members tell you that you are particularly gifted in something? Don't be afraid of what God may be calling you to do. Even in the day to day decisions.

Like Jacob, we may think that our decisions will cause the death of a relationship, but in our surrender, God saves us and we experience reconciliation and new life!

At Culpeper over these five years I have continued to pursue God's calling upon my life. I have wrestled with God for over the past year, feeling like God was calling me to something new.

God opened doors for me. I was called to be part of the Calling 21 team for the Conference and write the manual for all churches participating in the program. I was called to serve on the Board of Ordained Ministry, where I now ask others the questions, tell me about your call story and how it relates to Scripture. I was called to serve on the District Board of Ordained Ministry where I have the privilege of caring for other pastors on our district. I was called to serve on the leadership team and attend every provisional event where pastors who are in the process to be ordained are continuing to wrestle with God's calling upon their lives.

This is not coincidence friends, this was God will for my life.

When I heard that the Rappahannock Charge would be coming open, again I felt God calling me to something new. I knew I would be able to take everything I learned here and apply it to the three churches there on the charge.

Through being your pastor these past five years I have been called, changed, and ultimately blessed.

I have been called to live life together with you. Called to take a hard look at the needs of the community. This is the reason why I am so passionate about the Fourth of July Outreach Event and the Living the Dream Foundation. We need to be out in our community to know the needs of the community and ultimately do something about it.

The fourth of July is our best chance every year to see the most people in the community and remind them that God loves them, that God is with them even in difficult times.

I have been called to work with Ed and Gloria Long to promote the importance of the Living the Dream Foundation, a ministry that is literally saving lives in Culpeper and that gives people tools to combat addiction, depression, and suicide.

I have been called to oversee the adult Christian Education program here and I have been blown away by the caliber of amazing teachers we have here. I am amazed at their faith and knowledge of the Bible.

I have been called to start a new worship service, the Table and although we ultimately decided to end this service, the relationships that were made through it will last beyond my time here. There we created together an authentic community of faith and had the opportunity to share about our lives and pray for one another. I have been called to work with the best staff I have ever seen. Church do you know how blessed you are to work with our amazing staff?

I have been called to be here for this church during a time of transition, and now ultimately, I have been called to do a new thing.

I have been called and I have been changed.

I have learned that ministry happens more effectively when we work together. Jesus is such a great model for this. In his training and equipping the disciples they could take on the world all for the glory of God.

I have learned how to be more authentic. Because of your patience with me, I have learned how to share more from a place of struggle than a place of success and that ultimately for me that is a more powerful witness.

You have helped me change in my preaching. I went from a strictly manuscript preacher to being free of my manuscript.

You have taught me how to be a better pastor through the way that you care for one another.

One of my greatest blessings serving as your pastor is the watch the way you care for one another. That is more powerful than any sermon that I can or will ever deliver because that is how you live out your faith.

I have been blessed because like God saw Jacob I see you. You may feel like you are invisible sometimes in church, but you are not. I see you. You are important. God has a purpose for your life and like we talked about last Sunday, God has a future of hope waiting for you.

I have been blessed to work with true servant leaders who love God and love the church and inspire me. It would take too long for me to name all these people.

I have been blessed to journey with babies at the beginning of their lives and older adults at the end of their lives. There is a sacredness about that. Thank you for trusting me to be your pastor.

I have been blessed to serve on an amazing staff, people I consider my friends. Those willing to go the extra mile because they love the church and they love God. I have learned so much from all of them.

I have been blessed to serve with amazing laity who are clearly called by God in powerful ways.

Finally, I have been blessed that you have journeyed with me from a newly-wed to a mother of a beautiful little boy.

So, friends, my advice to you today is to not forget the gift of the church, the gathered community of Christ who meets for the purpose of worshipping God and growing in their discipleship.

Pastors like me will come and go, but your church needs you, yes, every single one of you. On your best day with the church or even on your worst days remember that God has called you to be here at this place for a reason. God is calling you to serve, will you answer?

My hope for all of you is that through your relationship with God you also feel called, changed and blessed. May God continue to bless you and Culpeper United Methodist Church and know that because of each and every one of you I will be forever changed. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱ New Interpreter's Biblical Commentary. Vol. I. Keck et al. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 1994. P. 566.