

PORTRAIT OF A CALL  
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What practical difference is there between atheists, who do not believe in God, and theists, who do believe in God? More critically, what is the practical difference between atheists and Christians?

A man was talking with his pastor about a woman with whom he had become close friends, who was an official in the Hungarian government. "Have you ever met a real live, lifelong, 100% atheist?" he asked. "I mean somebody who is an atheist the same way I am a Christian." "Well," he went on, "this woman is that kind of person. I thought, when I first met her, that getting to know somebody who lived her whole life, every minute, every day, without even a thought, not even a hint of God, would be a real revelation for me. I figured that she must be strange, different, like somebody from another planet."

"You know what I found out?" he asked. "There's not a bit of difference between her and me. She isn't somebody strange. She is just like your average, everyday, common-sense American. Like me, she never wonders, 'What does God want me to do now?' Like me, she doesn't lose sleep expecting God to come down and do something about the world. She just goes about her life deciding on the basis of what's in her own best interest, what's practical, what's possible. That little 'godless communist' could pass for you or me, anytime."

What is the difference between that little 'godless communist' and you and me as Christians? The practical difference is, or should be, a sense of being called.

This morning we read part of the story of the call of Moses as we find it in Exodus 3 and 4. The call of Moses is typical. It is a model. It is a portrait of a call. It illustrates how God calls us

and how we typically respond to that call. It illustrates the difference between those who refuse to acknowledge God and those who are God's people.

The call of God can be summed briefly in these words from verses 7 through 10. "I have seen the affliction of my people." "I have heard their cry." "I have come down to deliver them." "I will send you." I have seen and heard. I have come. I send you.

Tommy Douglas is one of the most respected Canadians in Canadian history.<sup>i</sup> Regardless of what we may think about his politics, there can be no doubt that Tommy Douglas had a sense of being sent by God. His political career was simply applied Christianity. As Donald Macdonald said of him at the time of his death, he moved from the pulpit to parliament not because he lost his faith, but because he was profoundly convinced that the principles of his faith could be applied to society. And that the Kingdom of God could be built on Earth.

In 1931, Douglas became pastor of a Baptist church in Weyburn, Saskatchewan. The following year he wrote for advice to JS Woodsworth about the unemployment in that city and the distress among the farmers in the surrounding rural areas. He heard the cries of the people and in those cries he heard the call of God saying, "Come, I will send you."<sup>ii</sup>

One of the crucial differences between atheists and us is that we do expect God to come. But more importantly, we understand ourselves to be part of that coming. We expect God to do something about the state of the world. We expect God to address the problems of the world, but we expect also that we shall be part of that answer. That is, God comes in us. God calls us to go for God. As has been said before, "Without God, we cannot. Without us, God will not." So, we as Christians are people who do ask, "What does God want me to do now?" We are people who do not make decisions selfishly, considering only our own self interests. We are people who don't always do what is practical. We are people who attempt the impossible. We are people who make the impossible possible and practical

Yet if we are honest, most of us are like the man in the story who cannot for the life of him discover what distinguishes him from the atheist. Most of us do not distinguish ourselves from others because we refuse to focus our faith. We have faith in the sense of intellectual assent and theological knowledge, but not in the sense of trust and commitment in our lives to God's will. What we need to realize, though, is that our resistance is typical of the religious experience. The first step in moving from atheism to theism is the stage of what we may call practical atheism. When our minds have been changed, but the rest of us resists. The call of Moses illustrates this quite well. For not only is this story of Moses the portrait of a call. It is the portrait of resistance to the call

Moses was a lot like most of us. He was playing a spectator's role. As a youth, he had impulsively been involved in what we might call a struggle when, in a fit of rage, he killed an Egyptian. But since fleeing Egypt, he had led an uninvolved life. Certainly, he knew about the struggles, the pain and cries his people back in Egypt. Now, however, he was a simple shepherd on the hillsides of Midian. Suddenly one day he experienced God in the wilderness on the mountain of God called Horeb. I suppose that isn't particularly unusual. After all, many of us experience God in the beauties and serenity of nature, but this experience was different. God reminded him of the problems back in Egypt. And then God said, "Come, I will send you. I'm sending you back into the fray. I am sending you to free my people."

How relieving it is to hear Moses' reply. "Who am I?" Moses is immediately aware of the gaping discrepancy between his ability and God's task. What business does a shepherd and a murderer have on such a mission? "Who am I, God? You can't be serious. I can't go!" How typical of us is Moses' reply. Yet also, how typical of many of God's prophets.

Isaiah had a similar response when God called him. "Woe is me;...for I am a man of unclean lips." "Who am I, God? I am a sinner. Surely you cannot be serious. I can't go."<sup>iii</sup>

Or think about Jeremiah. "Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth. You can't be serious. God, I'm too young. I can't go!"<sup>iv</sup>

There is honesty, though, in the resistance to God's call. Certainly, we all feel too small, too inadequate, too untrained, too young, too old, too sinful, too unworthy to be useful to God. Yet, there is in this resistance also a lack of faith. God says to Moses, "I will be with you. What you do is not of your own ability. What you do is being done by me working through you. The burning bush is a sign of my power. If I can manifest my power in a bush without destroying it, I can manifest my power in you without destroying you. I can work through you. Come. I will send you."

But Moses says, "What shall I tell the people when they ask me your name?" "They won't believe that you spoke to me and sent me to them." These two objections haven't got much to do with the people to whom Moses was sent, of course. They really concern Moses himself. They are really expressions of his own doubt and his own resistance to God. He seeks something more. He wants to know that he will be successful. He doesn't want to risk. God's answer isn't totally satisfactory.

What is God's name? "I am who I am," says God. And if they ask who I am, tell them that I am the God of their forbearers. In other words, God is the one revealed in history and is the one who will be revealed in his actions in future history. But you cannot know in advance what God will do. You go knowing only that God will do something.

Then God said to Moses, "I will give you a sign to show the people so that they will believe you and listen to your voice."

"But," replies reluctant Moses still resisting, "I am not eloquent. I don't know what to say." "Am I not the Creator?" answers God. "Am I not the one who made your mouth? I will put the words in it."

Quite a few years ago I heard a story about a self-made millionaire named Eugene Lang. Lang died about 5 years ago at

the age of 98. Over his lifetime he received many awards and recognition for his charitable work. This impressive story that I have remembered all these years is about how it all began.

Eugene Lang grew up in a poor area of New York City. He went to university and found that he had an ability to make money. Back in 1980, at the age of 62, Lang was asked back to his public school to speak at the graduation ceremony from grade 8. The school had changed substantially since he went there. It was predominantly attended by black children now. Now most of the students were poor and a large percentage of them would never get out of high school. Many would become involved with drugs and crime, and they would live out their days on the streets.

As Lang sat there thinking about his carefully thought-out speech, he began to feel uneasy. What could he say to these young people that would mean anything? Sure, he once graduated from the school, but he was a stranger there now. He was white, educated and rich. He wanted to tell them to keep in there and get their education. He wanted to tell them that the world is waiting for them to conquer. But most of these students feel that this is just a fairy tale.

When his turn to speak came, Lang threw away his speech, although he didn't really know what he was going to say. Instead of giving the students a pep talk, he gave them a promise. He promised that he would give them money to go to college if they would keep on in school. He had a feeling inside him that if it is to be, it is up to me. And so, he was prepared to make it happen.

Lang didn't know what was going to happen. College was still a long way off for these young people. As of the year of the article about him, of the original 61 grade 8 graduating students, eleven had left New York. Of the remaining 50, 47 qualified for college. What made the difference in these young people's lives was not just the money. It was the personality of Eugene Lang. Lang had taken a personal interest in these young people. He met with them regularly. He knew them and valued them as

people. And they knew that they were valued by him. They knew that someone believed in them. God said, "Come, I will send you." A rich, comfortable person felt uncomfortable, but he listened to the voice inside him, and the cries of the people were answered.

For Moses finally came the moment of decision. Time had run out. There were no more reasons to delay. Now he must either go or refuse. What does Moses decide to do? He refuses again! Moses resists. "Oh, my Lord, send, I pray, some other person." His plea is timid, but it is desperate. Please send someone else. And the anger of God was kindled against Moses.

Nonetheless, God gave him a second chance. Or is it a fifth chance? God made a concession. God gave him Aaron, not to take Moses' place, not to relieve Moses of responsibility, but simply to be his mouthpiece.

Then the discussion ended. This arrangement is not open to further negotiation. It was time to go. The world was waiting.

The world today is also waiting. The air is full of calls. The calls of the poor. Of the oppressed. Of the disadvantaged. Of the victims. Of the unemployed. Of the city. Of the country. Of the nation. Of the world. God has heard the cries. God is seeing the suffering. God has come and God is saying to us, "Come, I will send you." The practical difference between the atheist and the Christian is that we hear the call, and we go.

Without us, God will not. With God, we can. Will we go? The world is waiting. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> In 2004, a CBC Television program named Tommy Douglas "The Greatest Canadian", based on a Canada-wide, viewer-supported survey.

<sup>ii</sup> See, for example, <https://www.canadianchristianleaders.org/leader/tommy-douglas/>

<sup>iii</sup> Isaiah 6.

<sup>iv</sup> Jeremiah 1.