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4/01/2018 | Monthly Topic, Vocation and timing

Timelines

by Deborah K. Farrington

It began about two months before my 30th birthday. I was suddenly in a panic. I was turning 30 and had absolutely nothing to show for it.

My body wouldn't function anymore. Life as I knew it would be over. Intellectually, I knew this was silly. Emotionally, that didn't matter.

The panic lasted for almost six months. I felt as if I'd failed some cosmic keeper of the deadlines. I wasn't married. I didn't even have a serious boyfriend. I didn't have any children. I didn't even have a dog or cat. I didn't own a home, wasn't part of a church or any civic organizations. I had a good job, but still, what had I done with my life? I was supposed to have accomplished so much more by this time, or at least, that's how it seemed at the time.

Those six months were some of the worst and best of my life. I woke up on my 30th birthday and, to my relief, my body seemed to be the same as it had been when I'd gone to bed the night before. With that disaster averted, I finally turned my attention to my life and began to take stock, and discovered that some of my concerns were real, and ones I could work on. Others were just cultural expectations, and it was time to let go of them.

Perhaps the first expectation to go by the wayside was the question of marriage and children. I've never really worried much about having children, and I'm a firm believer that if you're not dying to have a child you shouldn't have them. It's a little like writing a book: you'd better really love the idea before you get started because that's the only thing that will ever get you through writer's block and other difficult writing days. Though now at the age of 49 I have a wonderful stepson, at 30 I wasn't aching for a child. Since the only clock ticking was the one of other people's expectations, and not

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my own biological one, I stopped worrying about marriage and kids. They would happen, if ever, when it was time.

In the meantime, I realized I liked the single life. I enjoyed my freedom, and the fact that no one cared if I put the cap on the toothpaste or not. I had friends. My life was busy and enjoyable for the most part. If I got married some day, so be it, but I wasn't going to go to my grave regretting my life no matter how it turned out. Whether being single was a transitional stage or a permanent way of life for me wasn't in my control, and I was finally okay with that.

Owning my own home turned out to be something I cared about more. What was preventing me from buying a home?

I could afford one. Primarily I was stalled by my own sense that I wasn't a grown-up yet. So I saved my money, steeled my courage, and finally bought a condominium. I bought grown-up furniture and real dishes, and finally got rid of the orange crates I'd been using for bookshelves. Living in my own space with things around me that I'd chosen felt absolutely marvelous. I looked back and wondered why I'd spent so many years putting my life on hold, as if marriage was the only legitimate marker of being a grown-up.

I made lots of other changes as a result of that crisis. But the most important one was that after an absence of many years I re-joined the church and started nurturing my spiritual life. The church I joined held a class that taught me a wide variety of contemplative prayer practices, and I learned about becoming quiet and listening intentionally for God's voice and guidance in my life. It was in that course that I began to understand the nature of the transition I'd been living through. I had unconsciously set myself an ambitious agenda based on cultural norms as I understood them, an agenda that had very little to do with God's call to me. Midway through the course I woke up in the

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wee hours of the morning and sat bolt upright in bed, realizing for the first time in my life that God loved me exactly as I was. The agenda I'd set for myself — like the New Year's resolutions we make every year — had little to do with God, much less my own hopes and dreams.

That's the struggle for most of us in times of transition. Letting go of the reins, dropping our vested interest in the agenda we've set or let others set, and listening for what God truly calls us to be and do — that's the challenge.

The time I spent struggling with the expectations I'd set for myself was difficult. Had I known the stories then, I would have compared my time to that of the Israelites out in the desert after leaving Egypt and before getting to the land God promised them. The tale of their journey is a good one for any of us in transitions; both their pitfalls and their successes make for good story and are instructive. The Israelites struggled so hard out there in the desert, trying to find a way to stop being slaves and learn to be more fully the people of God.

That's the struggle for most of us in times of transition. Letting go of the reins, dropping our vested interest in the agenda we've set or let others set, and listening for what God truly calls us to be and do — that's the challenge. There's not one way of doing this; most of us have to figure out what will help us let go. Perhaps the only constant is that learning to let go and listen is easier to do in community than it is by ourselves. For me, it was the support and encouragement of others in the class on contemplative prayer that helped me hear more clearly. For you, it might be a conversation with a friend in the dog park while your pooches run around.

Each January we hear about and are encouraged to come up with New Year's resolutions. They're almost always about the things we hate about ourselves, and they're often culturally conditioned. We're overweight, or we don't exercise enough, or we're not patient enough with friends and family. My suggestion is to skip the resolutions this year. Spend some time this January taking stock of your life in a different way. Make a list of the things you thought you'd have done by now, the things that weigh heavily on you, and talk with God about that list. If your list includes things that you don't really care about, and you don't sense God investing a lot of energy in them, let them go. Maybe the time isn't right, or maybe you're spending energy trying to fulfill other people's dreams. But if there are things on your list that really grab you and you're not pursuing them right now, make them part of your ongoing conversation with God. Those things that really have your attention may be clues to the place to which God calls you. Be open to creative ideas that might come your way, or to windows or

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doors that might open up. Try to be open to pathways you wouldn't have anticipate as well; God is an expert at surprising us.

In the midst of my own crisis I discovered that I had been spending entirely too much energy focusing on myself, and that it was time to turn my attention outward a bit. I ended up becoming a youth leader as a result of my crisis, which was just about the last thing I would have expected. It was also one of the best adventures of my life, one it would have been a shame to miss.

Debra K. Farrington is a freelance writer, and the author of seven books of Christian spirituality, including [The Seasons of a Restless Heart: A Spiritual Companion for Living in Transition](#).

This article first appeared in the January 2006 issue of Café (boldcafe.org). <https://www.boldcafe.org/timelines/>

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04/01/2018 | Faith Reflections, Monthly Topic, Vocation

Vocation and timing

by Angela Denker

My favorite Bible passage about time is found in John 7:1-6.

It tells about the time when Jesus' friends went, reluctantly, to a festival without him. They told him he should come, but he told them to go without him.

"My time has not yet come," he said.

Maybe it's because I'm an introvert, hesitant to attend parties at all— and when I do, you can usually find me huddled near the snack table— but I love this reminder from Jesus about the importance of timing when it comes to exercising your vocation, or God's call to you in your daily life.

The word vocation originated in the Roman church. It comes from the Latin *vocare*, or to call or invoke.

For centuries—and for many Christians even now — vocation has been erroneously seen as something strictly reserved for priests, religious sisters or pastors. I used to teach an introductory discipleship course that included a discussion of vocation. I always started with a picture of a nun wearing a habit, and everyone always recognized her as a symbol of vocation.

To many people, the word vocation means something far removed from ordinary, everyday life, as if God's calling—God's *vocare*—is reserved for someone else. For that person you knew in high school who gave up their career to go to seminary. For your missionary friend. For your youth pastor. Anyone but you.

The truth, though, is that God's call has never been reserved only for those who serve the church in ordained or vowed ministry. In his critique of the corruption in the church of his day, Luther repeatedly

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cited 1 Peter 2:9: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people."

For some of you, that might mean finding vocation at work or school. It might mean pondering on your way to the office or to the classroom or to the job site: What would Jesus say to this client? How would Jesus address this student or professor? How might Jesus respond to this supervisor?

For some of you, vocation might mean something outside paid work or school. It might mean work in the family: As caregiver for children, parents or a spouse. It might mean writing, or volunteering, or organizing.

Vocation means many things to many people. It's not easily definable. But like Jesus' words to his disciples, timing is important when it comes to vocation.

You'll likely find that your vocation, your calling from God, will shift throughout your life. As you grow in faith and trust of the Lord, you will sense God's calling shifting with your circumstances. Timing matters.

Jesus knew this. He did not allow himself to be pressured into responding to God's call the way his friends or even his family wanted him to respond. He held back, and this is key: Jesus spent time in discernment and prayer as he looked to respond to God's call in his life.

Jesus understood that he had no one to answer to, ultimately, besides God. Jesus reminds you of this ultimate gift and responsibility today, as social media feedback can sometimes whirl at a dizzying pace.

But Jesus knew that God had called him to public ministry. So when his time came, he went out on his own and began to teach. Not all believed in him – many doubted him or insulted his family background. But Jesus stayed faithful to God's call. He did not waver. He paid attention to God's timing.

God's timing and God's call in my life have been both constant and always evolving. When I graduated college, I considered applying directly to seminary. But I had an equally strong calling – at that time – to journalism: to tell people's stories and to report the truth.

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Five years later, having covered the Super Bowl, been published in Sports Illustrated, and enjoyed all the perks of high-profile sports coverage – I still felt a strong calling from God to tell the Gospel story in an unambiguous way, directly – as a parish pastor.

I went to seminary, served congregations in Chicago and in California, and then I sensed God's calling shifting again. My husband, Ben, and I now have two young sons, and I sensed a call to be more present with them. I also sensed a call from God to explore using my journalistic and pastoral training to share my call from God through public writing and speaking.

This shifting call hasn't been easy. In those inevitable moments of doubt, I continue to remember Jesus' words to his disciples in John 7. When it comes to God's call, timing is paramount. It is never all easy, and it is never all hard. You will sometimes be praised and adored, as Jesus was – and you will sometimes be scorned and ignored, as Jesus was. The one constant is God's direction – to you – God's desire for you to use your gifts to follow Jesus, however you can in this time and in the time to come.

The Rev. Angela Denker is a former sportswriter turned Lutheran pastor, writer, speaker—and full-time mom of two little boys—based in Minneapolis. Denker is a contributor to various publications, including The Washington Post, Sports Illustrated, Red Letter Christians, and Living Lutheran. Her forthcoming book, Red State Christians: Meet the Voters who elected Donald Trump, will be published by Fortress Press in 2019. Denker blogs at A Good Christian Woman ... Not that One, where she tries to share Jesus' love and refute the rumors about women, Christians, motherhood, and Jesus.

This article first appeared in the April 2008 issue. <https://www.boldcafe.org/vocation-and-timing/>