



# Questions of Calling

## Small Group Guide

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A Program of the Collegeville Institute Seminars

# Table of Contents

<i>Introductory Session: Living the Questions</i>	3
<i>Session 1: Who Am I?</i>	8
<i>Session 2: Where Am I?</i>	13
<i>Session 3: Where Am I Going?</i>	17
<i>Session 4: Who or What Do I Belong To?</i>	22
<i>Session 5: What's My Story?</i>	26

# Introductory Session: Living the Questions

Once upon a time, a young woman came into my office distraught. She had the opportunity to take an internship in Washington DC for year, a competitive position she'd worked hard to get. Yet, her grandmother was dying in the city in which we sat a thousand miles away, watching golden mountain ash leaves swirl outside in the window. Over and over again, she asked the question: **"What should I do?"**

We talked late into that fall afternoon, outlining possible courses of action she might take and sorting through potential consequences.

Then I posed another question: **"Where's the invitation in all of this?"**

I had no answers for the question she'd been asking, nor even the one I posed. But her initial question – what should I do? – seemed tight and constricting. It implied some things that were not actually true.

- » First, the question – what should I do? – assumed that she had an agency she did not have. Things were happening that she hadn't chosen and wasn't in charge of. Asking a different question allowed her to acknowledge circumstances beyond her control.
- » Second, it presumed a freedom she did not feel. She was caught between competing responsibilities to her family, on one hand, and to her future, on the other. Both were serious responsibilities, but with very different valences. Asking a different question allowed his young woman to admit the struggle.

"Where's the invitation in all of this?" This question shifted the focus from deciding to discerning; instead of having to act, she was being invited to respond. Asking a different question didn't make things any easier, but it gave her a different angle of vision. She needed that.

I don't know how the story ended. I do know that sometimes asking the right question is more important than coming up with an answer to the wrong one. Asking a bigger question gave this young woman some room to move around in.

"Where's the invitation in all of this?" It was a question she could "live into." Offering advice to a young poet, Austrian poet Rainer Marie Rilke (1875-1926) underscored the importance of questions, question one could live into:

Have patience with all that is unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language.

Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them.

Live the questions now.

Perhaps, then, someday far into the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer."

—Rainer Marie Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet

Living the questions – it's the journey of a lifetime. But living the questions is a powerful way to understand discipleship, the called life. When you attend to the questions in the Bible, you encounter a God who asks a lot of them. God calls by asking questions.

Consider the questions that ring throughout the creation stories, particularly in Genesis 3 and 4. They serve as a GPS system for living in the world according to God.

1. **"Where are you?"** (Gen 3:9) Until the fateful incident with the forbidden fruit, Adam used to walk in the garden in the cool of the evening and talk to God. When he realizes he's naked, Adam is a no-show, and God misses the conversation. The question asks about Adam's physical location but also his spiritual positioning. What's yours?
2. **"Who told you that?"** (Gen 3:11) God asks Adam why he was ashamed of being naked, but the question probes more deeply. He's playing a role in someone else's script, and God wants to
3. **"What have you done?"** (Gen 3:13) Surely God knows the answer, because God's all-knowing, right? But God wants to hear from the humans themselves, in order to see if they own up to what they did or blame each other, the serpent – even God for creating them. What have you done and left undone, both good and bad?
4. **"Why are you angry?"** (Gen 4:6) This question is to Cain, who along with Abel, are first sons of the first couple, Adam and Eve. Cain is hurt, because he thinks God likes his brother's grain offering better than his own slab of dead meat. But beneath anger is fear, and the question God asks probes Cain's underlying fears. What are his fears? What are yours?
5. **"Where is your brother?"** (Gen 4:9) Cain had killed Abel, and God noticed the absence. God's question asks each of us how we regard the others in our lives. Are they siblings? Strangers? Enemies? Friends? Children of God?

To understand what it's like being in the world God created, live into the Creator's questions.

Like Father, like Son. In John's gospel, Jesus appears on the scene as an adult, walking and talking. The first words out of his mouth are a question: "What are you looking for?" (John 1.38) John the Baptist has just announced him as the "Lamb of God," and two of John's followers begin trailing Jesus. Jesus confronts them: "What are you looking for?" Only after posing that question does Jesus invite disciples to "follow me" (John 1.43).

- » **What are you looking for?** The question probes the heart's deepest longings, which we need to bring to consciousness and which God cares about. It's a question disciples can live into today.

Follow the questions that Jesus poses to disciples throughout his ministry. Jesus asks a blind man, "What do you want me to do for you?" (Luke 18.41, Matthew 10.51) It should have been obvious, right? Blind people must want to see. But Jesus makes no assumptions; rather, he asks what the man wants. In so doing, Jesus treats him as an equal and invites him into relationship.

- » **What do you want me to do for you?** The question invites us into relationship with Jesus, bringing our brokenness to him for healing. It's a question disciples can live into today.

In Mark's gospel, just after the healing of another blind man, Jesus asks more questions, questions about how the crowds perceive him. "Who do people say that I am?" (Mark 8.27) The disciples dutifully answer: John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets, signaling to Jesus the people's desire to get out from under the thumb of the Roman occupying army. Then, Jesus poses the question directly to the disciples: "Who do *you* say that I am?" (Mark 8.29) Peter answers, "The Messiah!" who was to be the liberator. In Mark's gospel, it's the wrong answer, and Jesus begins to talk about being a "Son of Man" who must suffer, die, and be resurrected. When Peter objects to this scenario, Jesus rebukes him, calling him "Satan" and ordering him behind him. But he won't sever ties with Peter, no matter how wrong he gets it. "Get behind me" is only a harsher version of the invitation to "follow me."

- » **Remembering how Jesus worked with his most impetuous disciples, who do you say that Jesus is?** It's a question disciples today can live into.

We're always looking to the bible for answers to our questions, but when we read the bible for the questions it asks us, we encounter a God who calls us by asking questions. These questions invite us onto a path of discipleship that is the journey of a lifetime.

To begin the journey, I want to think about calling through a series of five questions that are woven throughout scripture:

- » Who are you?
- » Where are you?
- » Where are you going?
- » Who do you belong to?
- » What's your story?

**Who am I?** The question asks about identity, and the anchoring identity for Christians is simply being a disciple, nothing more and nothing less. Happily, Jesus had very eclectic tastes, and there was room on the discipleship bus for all kinds of people. Indeed, he sought out people of all kinds of different perspectives and points-of-view. Exploring this question cultivates a sense that “This is who I am. This is what I stand for. This is who I stand with.”

**Where am I?** This question invites us to appreciate our various roles and the responsibilities they entail. All of them are tethered to that anchoring identity, even as they allow us to serve in wildly different places where we may be called. Exploring this question cultivates a sense that “I’m in the right place.”

**Where am I going?** This question acknowledges that all of us called to be on the journey of discipleship. We may not always know the destination all the time, but we know that if we keep Jesus in front of us, we’ll get where we need to go. Exploring this question cultivates a sense that “I’m on the right path.”

**Who do I belong to?** Humans are social animals, and we are called into communities. We both shape and are shaped by the company we keep. Hopefully, those communities bring out the best in us. Exploring this question cultivates the sense that “If you’re with me, I can be my best self.”

**What’s your story?** Every person and every congregation have a unique story to tell. You’re both author and leading character of that story, so make it a story that gives life. Let it begin that way all good stories do: “In the beginning...” or “Once upon a time...”

We’ll explore each question by anchoring it in experience, both your own personal experience and the experience of your congregation. Figures from the Old New Testament will be our guides, fellow travelers like Adam and Eve, the first humans; Abram of Ur; Ruth of Moab; Peter, an impetuous disciple; a blind man who “sees” better than most of the people around him, and Jesus himself.

At the end of each section, there are a series of exercises that invite you to think concretely about your calling. These might be helpful for a portfolio or resume; they might deepen a relationship you have with a friend or partner; they might be useful for a small group in your congregation to do together.

These are questions you can live for a lifetime, and you may address them differently at 25 than at 50 or 65. But they're worth keeping close, along with the God who keeps asking them.

Blessings for the journey ahead!

Marty Stortz

# Session 1: Who Am I?

A first question of calling centers on identity: who am I? Who are we? Addressing these questions invites exploration of perspective or point-of-view. From where I stand, I may not be able to see everything, but I certainly can see some things. If I don't speak about who I am and what I see, no one else can see it either.

After a few months living in my home, I realized I purchased the property from a DIY Weekend Warrior. A lot of the repairs he'd done needed re-doing, and I asked around for a good handyman. One friend simply handed me a business card on high-quality cardstock that said nothing more than this:

**Emmet Lynch**  
**Fixer**

**510-227-4025**

I phoned, and three days later Emmett Lynch, Fixer showed up at my door, toolbox in hand, a small dog named Emma at his side. He explained to me that he wasn't a plumber or an electrician, but he could tell me if I'd have to get one in. He couldn't do all that, but he could fix what needed fixing. I showed him what needed to be done, and he did it. Emmett knew what he was – and what he wasn't. Like his cardstock, he did high-quality work. His was the most valuable business card I had.

Emmett took great pride in his work, and Identity is always inflected by core commitments and values. Exploring questions of identity, point-of-view, core commitments develop a sense that "This is who I am; this is what I see from where I stand; this is what I stand for."

Although I never put it on a business card, I introduce myself as a first-gen, white, feminist Christian. I've thought carefully about the adjectives and nouns in that sentence. I'm *first-gen*, first in my immediate family to have a college degree, which offers a unique angle of vision in my professional circles. I'm *white*, which in my case is visibly obvious, but in choosing that adjective I try to signal that race matters and that mine has given me privileges I neither had to fight for nor earn. I'm a *feminist*, which signals a stance towards women's empowerment.

All of those adjectives modify the noun *Christian*, because being a disciple of Jesus orients everything else. I call being a Christian my **anchoring identity**; it orients everything else. I don't know how the world looks to a Buddhist or Muslim, but I know what it looks like to this white, feminist Christian. Even though my view is partial, I'm called to stand up for what I see from where I stand,



even as I yearn for view to be expanded by others.

A young Muslim grad student easily named his anchoring identity and the adjectives that modified it. "I am a black Muslim citizen of the world." He described growing up in a refugee camp in Kenya and emigrating to the United States as a child. "I was never 'black' until I came here," he mused, and in high school, he joined racial and religious justice movements. He remembered his mother going to PTA meetings, even when she couldn't understand a word of English. Education was important in that family, and his mother wanted to stand up for her children. Now, he searches out opportunities to expand his own horizons, aiming to learn all the languages of northern Africa so he can serve in the U.S. State Department. He consciously trains himself to be a "citizen of the world."

- » How would you describe yourself? What's your anchoring identity? What adjectives would you add to it?
- » How would you describe your congregation? What is its anchoring identity? What adjectives would you add to it?

Addressing these questions enhances a sense that "This is who I am; this is how I want to show up in the world."

## *Thinking biblically*

The story of Moses underscores questions of identity, perspective, and point-of-view. He begins his life just as a new ruler ascends the Egyptian throne, a Pharaoh who sought to enslave rather than co-exist with the Hebrew peoples living in Egypt (Exodus 1-2). Fearing they would outnumber the Egyptians, Pharaoh ordered all infant Hebrew boys to be killed. Hoping to spare his live, Moses' mother hid her son in a basket in the bulrushes along the river. There he was discovered by Pharaoh's daughter, who proposed to adopt him and hired his mother as the boy's wet-nurse. Moses was raised in royalty.

Yet Moses never forgot his people. When he saw an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew worker, he was incensed and killed the Egyptian. The next day, when he saw two Hebrew men fighting and tried to intervene, one of the men asked him: "Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" (Ex 2.14) Moses realized that not only was his deed known, but it had probably been exposed to the Egyptian authorities by one of his own kinsmen. Now Pharaoh regarded him as Hebrew, while the Hebrew people regarded him as Egyptian.

Who was Moses? What anchored his identity? Was he Egyptian or Hebrew? Son of Pharaoh's daughter or son of a Hebrew slave woman? However he chose to identify himself, God anchored him, naming him "prophet" and calling him to lead the Hebrew people out of slavery and into a

promised land.

The journey to the promised land was packed with challenges. In the fierce landscape of the Sinai desert, where the people “murmured” against God and God “murmured” against the people, Moses had to stand up before God for the people and to stand up before the people for God. It was not an easy place to stand.

- » What or who have you had to stand up for? And to whom?
- » What or who has your congregation had to stand up for? And to whom?

And yet God continued to anchor Moses, eventually revealing to him the divine identity. When Moses returned from Mt. Sinai with stone tablets containing the commandments, he found his people worshipping an idol. He smashed the tablets, punished the people, returned to the Lord, and begged to be released from his calling. Again, God persisted, and Moses agreed to continue, if he could see the Lord’s goodness pass before him. As it did, the Lord left Moses – and the rest of us – a God’s eye view of things. If there were a business card for the Lord, it might look like this.



- » How would you design God’s business card? What is God’s anchoring identity for you? How would you display it?
- » If you were to design a business card for your congregation? What is its anchoring identity? How would you display it?

## Exercise – Who am I?

Vocation is nothing more – and nothing less – than thinking about how you want to “show up” in the world. Who are you? What is your anchoring identity? You may have a digital resume or curriculum vitae. You may simply want to introduce yourself to a group or team. Here are some elements that telegraph your own distinctive lens:

- » Name
- » Headshot
- » Tagline
- » Background image
- » Introduction or elevator speech

Together, these five elements can create a powerful first impression of how you want to “show up” in the world.

**Name** – What’s in a name? What’s your relationship to your birth name? Does it have particular significance to your family or faith tradition? Do you have a nickname? Do you have other names you prefer? What’s in your name?

Names identify us to ourselves and others; they can trigger expectations, even stereotypes or prejudices. Poet Assetou Xango reflects on the power of names in a poem. Read it – or listen to her perform it.

- » What name will you choose?

**Headshot** – A headshot offers a visual presentation of who you are. If you use a photograph of yourself, would you want that image to be in profile or full-on? What’s the expression you want on your face? Photographs communicate certain information about race, gender, and age, which again may trigger certain expectations or stereotypes from others, even as they are only one way of identifying who you are.

You may choose not to share a photograph of yourself, but rather an image of something that represents who you are and what you stand for.

- » How will you choose to identify yourself visually?

**Tagline** – The tagline is a way of presenting your anchoring identity in your own terms. Pay attention to the noun that anchors your identity, e.g., “citizen of the world,” “artist,” “pilgrim and fellow-traveler.” Think of adjectives that describe you, underscore your interests, and highlight your strengths, e.g., “kind,” “justice-seeking,” “creative,” etc. Choose words that sum up your passions and capture the imaginations of others.

The tagline should be legible to people outside the circles of your experience, leaving them with the feeling that they want to get to know you better and find ways to make common cause with you.

- » What tagline will you choose?

**Background image** – Think of an image that you might want behind your name, your headshot, or your tagline. Quite literally, this image displays your own horizon of vision and backgrounds your anchoring identity. Introduce a community of people you claim, e.g., a team or choir or family. Share the photograph of a place that means a lot to you. If you love to take photographs, use one of your own. If you're an artist or graphic designer, use one of your own pieces.

- » What background will you choose?

**Introduction or elevator speech** – Now, bring all of these elements together in a brief introduction, written or oral. Pretend you're on an elevator going to top floor and introduce yourself to someone who is a complete stranger. Put words behind the images you used above; build out your tagline.

In small groups, present your elevator speech orally, or include this as a brief introduction to a portfolio or resume. Most importantly, your introduction signals who you are, where you stand, and what you stand for.

- » How will you introduce yourself?

## Session 2: Where am I?

A second question of calling poses the question of place: where are you? What are the roles you inhabit and the responsibilities they entail? Realtors stress the importance of “location, location, location,” and addressing the question of place invites us to explore physical and social locations by identifying the roles we fill. While the first question centered on our anchoring identity, **this question focuses on the places where we live out that identity.**

For example, my anchoring identity was a *Christian*. Yet, precisely as a *Christian*, I serve in a variety of roles tethered to that anchoring identity: daughter, writer, citizen, and retired professor. I am a daughter, and as a daughter with elderly parents, I am called to care, console, support, and nurture the same people who were once responsible for me. I am a writer, and I serve others by writing, giving language to things they deeply know but maybe need words to describe. I’m a citizen of Minneapolis, a city with a history of racism I am called to heal. I am a professor, with ongoing ties to my profession and different academic institutions.

Daughter, writer, citizen, professor: I have multiple roles to play in the stage that I call my life. Each of those roles has its own responsibilities, and all of them drop anchor in my identity as a Christian. When my life gets out of balance, and I find the duties of being a professor overwhelming the duties of being a parent, I center myself on that anchoring identity and weigh competing obligations and claims from that “still point of a turning world.” (T.S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” 1935)

- » Go back to your anchoring identity. What are the various roles and responsibilities tethered to it?
- » Go back to your congregation’s anchoring identity. What are the various roles and responsibilities tethered to it?

One of my students loved playing hockey in high school and wanted to continue in college. Charlie knew he wasn’t good enough to play at a Division I school, so he deliberately sought out a Division III school where he could more easily qualify for the team. “I’ll be a better student, if I can also be a hockey-player.” Charlie knew that, for him, these two roles were complimentary, so he sought a place where he could do both. By his senior year, he was captain of the team. Charlie found the right place, in terms of both physical and social locations.

German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) identifies these roles as “*places of responsibility*,” where one might serve both God and neighbor. Some roles we choose; other roles choose us, as Bonhoeffer found in his own life. He grew up in a family that was only nominally Christian, and his parents expected him to be a doctor or an attorney. Instead, he was drawn to the study of theology. Bonhoeffer chose to be a theologian and pastor, eventually becoming a member

of the faculty at Union Theological Seminary in New York. His Union colleagues hoped he would sit out World War II there, but he returned to Germany to “share the trials of this time with my people.” There he worked as a double agent in the German military intelligence corps, the Abwehr. It was a role that chose him, and when he was arrested as part of a conspiracy to assassinate Adolf Hitler, imprisoned, and sentenced to death, he wrote a haunting poem from prison: “[Who Am I?](#)”

In the poem, Bonhoeffer named the roles that had chosen him – squire, friend, bird in a cage, and landed finally on his anchoring identity: “Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine.” For Bonhoeffer, the question “who am I?” was really the question “whose am I?”

## *Thinking biblically*

The creation narratives stand as the first stories of human calling, but they also speak of the importance of physical and social location, the roles and responsibilities they entail. In the first account, the first humans are created to “be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, have dominion” (Gen 1.28), though that “dominion” quickly devolved into “domination.” The Lord God gives humans the responsibility of naming the animals. God gives them a garden to live in, tend, and enjoy, along with a list of what to eat – and what to refrain from eating.

Think of the roles that Adam and Eve have, along with the responsibilities attached to each role. Adam is Animal-Namer, Gardener, Caretaker, even God-Walker, because Adam used to walk in evening with God in the garden (Gen 3.8-9). Eve is Child-Bearer and Helpmate to Adam. The core responsibility in each of role is to obedience. And here obedience is less complying to God’s commands than listening for God’s instruction, literally, a “hearing” (in Latin, *-audire*) directed “toward” (in Latin, *ob-*) God.

When the serpent tempts them to taste the very fruit God told them not to eat, God intervenes with a series of curses on Adam, Eve, and the serpent. Importantly, these curses do not destroy the various relationships between any of them, but make it more difficult to fulfill the responsibilities that these roles entail.

Read [Gen 3.14-19](#). Notice what happens to the various relationships –

- » between the serpent and the rest of the animals,
- » between the serpent and the woman,
- » between the woman and her children,
- » between the woman and the man,
- » between the man and the earth.

In the New Testament, the ministry of Jesus revolves around the holy city of Jerusalem, where the Temple resided. Besides being a ritual center and a site of pilgrimage, the Temple at Jerusalem was the place where Jews believed that God's presence had come to dwell with them.

With Jesus, God becomes present not in a place, but in a person. Jesus' anchoring identity is to be *Emmanuel*, "God with us," which he manifests as a person who eats and drinks, works and suffers among us. At some point in his ministry, Jesus has to make a stand in Jerusalem, God's presence as a Person confronting God's presence as a Place. He set his face toward Jerusalem (Luke 9.51).

Along the way Jesus contends with false expectations about his role and the responsibilities attached to it. Read [Mark 8.27-33](#) and think of the very different roles imputed to him.

"Who do people say that I am?"  
And they answered him, "John the Baptist;  
and others, Elijah;  
and still others, one of the prophets."  
He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?"  
Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."

#### Mark 8.27-28

Look at these roles imputed to Jesus. The prophet Elijah did not die but was whisked into heaven in a chariot. In Jewish expectation, someone returning Elijah's role would be responsible for announcing the "day of the Lord," a day of liberation, in the Temple heights. People yearned for Jesus to be Elijah.

People knew John the Baptist as a holy man who came preaching that coming kingdom of God. Someone coming in John's role signaled the end of Roman oppression. People yearned for Jesus to be John the Baptist.

And if Jesus returned in the role of any "one of the prophets" at all, that would mean the long-silent voice of the prophecy had returned. God hadn't forgotten God's people after all. People yearned for Jesus to bring the return of prophecy.

Even Peter's response, "You are the Messiah!" proved a false expectation, because Peter put Jesus in the role of the military hero that Jews in that moment desperately needed. People yearned for victory over the occupying Romans.

In response, Jesus clarified his role as a "Son of man," who would suffer, be rejected, executed, and on the third day rise again. Not exactly what was expecting, Peter tried to silence Jesus. Instead, Jesus called Peter "Satan," because the whole exchange smelled of his temptation in the wilderness. Jesus' clarification of his roles and responsibilities leaves Peter wondering whether his own role is to be a disciple of this man.

- » Think of Jesus' anchoring identity as Emmanuel, "God with us." How is God with you? Name the various roles Jesus plays in your life and in the life of your congregation: Teacher, Savior, Redeemer, Counselor, Prince of Peace, Dayspring, Friend, Partner, Lover?
- » Think of one responsibility each of these roles entails.
- » Have you ever imputed a role to Jesus that might have been false, born more of your own longing than his actual presence?

## Exercise – Making an inventory of roles and responsibilities

Here's an exercise that invites reflection on roles you've chosen and roles that have chosen you, along with their attendant responsibilities.

Who's your favorite actor or actress? What roles have they been in? Chadwick Boseman (1976-2020) played Stormin' Norman in Spike Lee's *Da Five Bloods* (2020). In casting him, Lee referenced Boseman's other great roles: "The character is heroic; he's a superhero. Who do we cast? We cast Jackie Robinson, James Brown, Thurgood Marshall, and we cast T'Challa." Chadwick Boseman inhabited all of these roles with both skill and grace.

1. **Think of all the roles you play.** You may not think of yourself as a superhero, but someone else does. Unlike Boseman, you don't get to play one role at a time. You have to play all of them at once.

Take a blank sheet of paper, put your name at the top, then list the roles you play. If you have trouble, think of the various stages on which you play: family, school, workplace, community, church, or neighborhood. What roles do engage on each of these stages? Friend? Christian? Parent? Child? Employee? Teammate? Friend? Make sure you capitalize each role.

2. **Now, look at your inventory of roles.** Some of them you chose, but some of them chose you. Roles that we choose are voluntary; roles that choose us are involuntary.

For example, Charlie chose to be a Hockey Player, but he had to be persuaded to be Captain of the team. Bonhoeffer chose to be a theologian; he didn't choose to be a double agent. We can't always control the roles that choose us, but they are "places of responsibility" nonetheless.

3. **Circle three roles on your inventory that are most important to your calling.** Go back to your list and identify one key responsibility you have in each role.

What does your roles and responsibilities inventory tell you about the places of your own calling?



## Session 3: Where am I Going?

A third and related question asks: where am I going? **Posing this question invites us to consider life as a journey.**

For example, a friend realized she was on a journey, when her husband of twenty years was diagnosed with a terminal illness. The years they thought they'd have together vanished, and she found herself juggling treatments, tests, and consultations with specialists. She could not bear to think of the final destination of their journey together. The thought of his death and the rest of her life without him paralyzed her. Instead, she focused on taking the next steps, steps which love, deep faith, and a wicked sense of humor kept revealing. Every day presented the opportunity for a new adventure, a new recipe, a different walk, visits with friends. "We have today," she thought. "What will today bring?" As she looked back on the journey after her husband had died, my friend summed up the path they had followed: "It's as if we'd bought tickets to Athens, but the plane landed in Oakland instead. Still Oakland has its charms."

Here, making the journey is as important as reaching a destination, which may be unclear, not yet in view, or suddenly altered. In those moments, all we can do is take the next steps. Core commitments point the way forward.

I learned the importance of taking the next steps when I hiked part of the medieval pilgrimage to [Santiago de Compostela](#), where the bones of St. James were allegedly buried. With another professor and friend, I'd scored a grant, part of which involved walking the Camino, literally, "The Way," as the trail to Santiago is known. After the first week, my friend developed blisters on her feet, which slowed her pace considerably. I was always ahead of her. When she finally said with some irritation, "Look, you go on. I'll meet you in Santiago," I had to make a discernment. Is this about getting to Santiago or doing the Camino with Lisa? My answer was clear, and when I gave up the goal of reaching Santiago and prioritized journeying with her, we had a far better trip.

After all, as poet Antonio Machado (1875-1939) observes, "the road is made by walking." Maybe our road would lead to Santiago, maybe it would lead somewhere else. We only had to worry about next steps.

**When you're called to a journey, sometimes taking the next step is as important as reaching the destination.**

Christian spirituality has always understood discipleship as a journey. After all, if Jesus is "the Way" (John 14.6), disciples want to be on it. In his *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) reproduced that journey with Jesus through a series of practices. In the practice of prayer, he invited disciples to join the journey, praying with their imaginations to conjure the sights, sounds, and smells along the way. He asked them to imagine what Jesus might be saying to them.

In another practice, the [examen](#), Ignatius asked disciples to pause at the end of the day and review where they'd found God in whatever the day had brought. Reviewing where God had been during the events of the day just ended, he surmised, would alert them to tracking God's footprints in the new day to come. Understanding discipleship as a journey helps keep disciples on track.

Wherever you are in your day, pause for a moment to do this five-step, abridged version of the examen

- » Quiet yourself; be aware of God's presence.
- » Review the day with gratitude.
- » Pay attention to your emotions.
- » Choose one experience and pray from it.
- » Look toward the next day.

## *Thinking biblically*

Happily, there are some seasoned fellow-travelers: Abram, who later becomes Abraham, and Jesus himself.

From the Hebrew Bible, the patriarch Abram offers wise counsel. God summoned him on a journey – without revealing its final destination. The journey meant leaving his country and his kindred with no more divine direction than the words “go... to a land that I will show you” (Genesis 12.1). To get there, then, Abram had to keep listening for God's direction. Only by regularly listening for God's counsel – again, that sense of obedience as “listening for” someone or something! – did Abram reach his destination.

A Jesuit priest captured the spirit of this kind of obedience, as he spoke about learning to “listen for” God's counsel. “When I first started praying, I talked all the time. In the beginning, I simply talked *at* God, like you'd talk at someone I didn't know very well, someone you sat next to on a plane and would never see again. Then, I found myself talking *to* God, as you would talk to an acquaintance. And gradually, I began to talk *with* God, as I'd talk with a trusted friend. Over time, I found myself listening. At first, I listened *to* God's words to me, which came through scripture or a conversation or a piece of reading. Now, though, I find myself listening *for* God, because God is pretty quiet these days. I keep showing up.” This is the meaning of obedience, listening for God, in words and in silences.

Jesus spent a lot of time listening for God, often apart from the crowds and usually on a mountain or in a deserted place. His time in prayer fueled him for the journey ahead. For his disciples, that journey was one without maps. After all, if Jesus was “the Way,” all they had to do was follow.

If Jesus had given them a detailed itinerary, the disciples could have looked ahead, saw that they were supposed to meet up with him in Capernaum next Tuesday, and then figure out the best way to get there. Instead, like God and Abram, Jesus gave disciples no more direction than the words “Follow me” (Matthew 4.18, et al.). He repeated the invitation often along the way. “Follow me.” The words are his first direction, when he calls disciples to leave their nets, their families, and their livelihoods. “Follow me.” The words are his final direction, when, as the risen Christ, he returned to cook them breakfast. The last words Jesus said to Peter are “Follow me!” (John 21.22)

“Follow me!” The words invite disciples then and now to practice obedience in its truest sense, always alert for Jesus’ guidance. “Follow me!” The words instruct Peter and the rest of us to keep Jesus always in front of them. When Jesus told Peter to “get behind me” (Mark 8.33), the rebuke is really only a harsher version of the same invitation made to all disciples over and over again: “Follow me.” Jesus could have told Peter to “Get lost!” Instead, he kept him on the journey, urging him to stay back – and stay close. Don’t get ahead of me – but don’t get too far behind me either. Don’t follow anyone or anything else. Keep me always in front of you. Follow me! What seems like a rebuke turns out to be a familiar invitation to follow. That was good news for Peter; it’s good news for all of us latter-day Peters!

Asking this question of calling – where am I going? – invites disciples today to think of their own journeys and their own next steps, both of which align with their anchoring identity to suggest a series of flexible goals. Exploring this question of calling cultivates the sense that “I’m on the right path.”

Here are two exercises to prompt reflection.

## Exercise 1 – Getting at core commitments, “This I Believe”

Writing a brief statement about one of your core commitments can be a powerful tool for reflection. Read or listen to the examples of [Eboo Patel](#), [Deirdre Sullivan](#), [Isabel Allende](#), or [Van Jones](#), each of whom tells a brief story (roughly 500 words) about a core commitment.

**Name your commitment:** Focus on a core commitment that you can name in a single word or phrase. E.g., Van Jones: “I believe in making my father proud.” Or Deirdre Sullivan: “I believe in always going to the funeral.” Or Eboo Patel: “We are each other’s business.”

**Tell a story about you:** Ground your commitment in an event that shaped it. Consider moments when that commitment was formed, tested, or changed. Be specific. Your story may heart-warming, gut-wrenching, or even funny, but it must be real. Tie the story to your own personal journey.

**Be positive:** Tell a story about what you do believe, not what you don’t believe. Avoid preaching

and editorializing.

**Be personal:** Make your statement about you, your life, and your journey; speak in the first person. If you write your statement down, write in your speaking voice, with words and phrases you would use in conversation.

**Be brief:** If you're writing, make your statement between 300-500 words. If you're speaking, make a voice memo of about two-three minutes. As you listen to each statement, identify the core commitment and one take-away for your own journey.

## Exercise 2 – Getting at flexible goals, “The Summoned Self”

Read David Brooks' brief article [“The Summoned Self”](#) (2010). Here he outlines two different ways of calling, a “well-planned life” and a “summoned life.” In the end, he opts for a life that includes elements of both.

Make sure you understand the different elements of each life. In a small group discuss, which kind of life appeals to you? Which better reflects your actual experience?

A well-planned life	A summoned life
Life as a project to be completed Individual agency emphasized “What should I do?”	Life as a landscape to be explored Core commitments emphasized “What is being asked of me in this place and time?”

Being called to a path highlights the importance of making a plan that aligns with your core commitments. Clayton Christensen says he values family, but his plan didn't have much room for them. Make sure your aspirations and goals are grounded in what you believe.

Now, think more concretely about your own journey and identify:

- » One short-term goal – “Where do I want to be at this year?”
- » One mid-range goal – “Where do I want to be in five years?”
- » One long-term goal – “Where do you want to be in forty years/when I retire?”
- » Now, return to your three goals. Do they reflect your core commitment? If so, how? If not, why not? Do you want to revise any of your goals?

Look at your goals again. Are these the same goals you would have had before COVID-19, before George Floyd's murder? How have these twin pandemics altered your goals – or not? What

circumstances might shift the goals you've identified? E.g., "It's as if we'd bought tickets to Athens, but the plane landed in Oakland instead."

Finally, identify one thing you need in your backpack for the journey ahead.

## Session 4: Who or What Do I Belong to?

**Who or what do you belong to? Who are your people?** Addressing these questions underscores something important about our callings: they're crowded! Vocations are populated by people who animate our callings and draw us into communities of belonging. Our calls can even extend beyond human community and into the natural world. A friend plans to leave her university post and return to veterinary medicine. A skilled "dog-whisperer," she's always been drawn to animals. "I can do more for the common good as a vet than as a professor of moral theology," she mused. "Pets make people happy." She feels called to care for animals. In so doing, she'll contribute to her own happiness, as well as "the world's deep need."

As a young woman worked through these exercises on identity, she easily chose a name, headshot, and tagline. For her background image, she eventually chose a photograph of her church choir. She belonged to a Korean evangelical congregation, a community that prized choral singing. Being a member of the choir had given her a place of belonging she deeply needed.

- » Which of those groups call out your talents and gifts?
- » Which invite you to be your best self?

To whom or what do you belong? Addressing this question exposes the complex relationship between individuals and communities. **What communities do I claim? And what communities claim me?** I belong to my wild and crazy family, even if I didn't choose them and they didn't choose me. I belong differently to my professional colleagues, my congregation, my friends, and my fellow-citizens. Again, I chose some of these people; others chose me. In a close relationship like friendship or marriage, two people continue to choose each other day after day. Some days, it's an easy choice; other days, not so much. Each of these relationships marks its members with certain values and certain practices or rituals of belonging.

I belong to Central Lutheran Church in downtown Minneapolis. Summer worship brings everyone outside in front of the church for coffee hour. Congregational members have already celebrated their rituals of belonging – the Lord's Supper, the preaching of the Word, and singing lustily and well. After worship is coffee hour, and coffee is for everyone. People in the neighborhood join us. Some of our neighbors have homes; some do not. Sunday coffee hour is a chance to practice hospitality, get acquainted with our neighbors, and let people know about our other ministries with people experiencing homelessness. People can volunteer to help or avail themselves of whatever resources they need.

- » What are some of your congregation's rituals and practices of belonging?
- » Which are "members-only"? Which are open to the larger community?

Hopefully, our communities of belonging encourage us to be our best selves, even contribute to a common good. A young woman felt a deep sense of belonging to the Hmong people, a community into which she was born and to which she felt deeply loyal. Whatever her place, wherever her path, Cindy felt called to work in that community. Initially, she wanted to be a human rights attorney, but her first pre-law courses were tough. She shifted her major to business, hoping to work with small business owners in the vibrant Hmong Village in St. Paul MN. Cindy understood herself to be called by and to a people. Identifying the Hmong people as her community of belonging grounded her, even as her career and professional goals shifted. With these people, however she served them, Cindy could be her best self.

## *Thinking biblically*

The biblical character of Ruth helps us understand more deeply the importance of communities of belonging. Ruth was a Moabite woman, who married into a Jewish family that had relocated to Moab to escape famine in their land. Eventually, all the men in the family died, leaving Ruth, her mother-in-law, Naomi, and her sister-in-law Orpah, also a Moabite woman, widowed and without protection.

Naomi took charge, and she proposed to send her two daughters-in-law back to their Moabite families. She herself planned to return to her kin in the city Bethlehem in Judah. Orpah packed her belongings, bid Ruth and Naomi farewell, and headed home.

Ruth, however, refused to leave Naomi. In a beautiful speech to her mother-in-law, she vowed to join her mother-in-law's communities of belonging. She was going with Naomi!

*"Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you!  
Where you go, I will go;  
Where you lodge, I will lodge;  
Your people shall be my people,  
and your God my God.  
Where you die, I will die –  
there I will be buried.  
May the Lord do thus and so to me,  
and more as well,  
if even death parts me from you!"*

Ruth 1.16-14

Seeing her determination, Naomi grudgingly allowed Ruth to accompany her. In Bethlehem the two made a life together, Ruth caring for Naomi. Her faithfulness to her mother-in-law was noticed by one of Naomi's kinsmen, Boaz. When he showed interest in Ruth, Naomi arranged for her to come to Boaz at night after he'd been feasting, in effect, "pimping" Ruth out to her kinsman. Declaring her

to be “a worthy woman” (Ruth 3.11), Boaz proposed marriage.

The book of Ruth ends with all of Bethlehem gathered around Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz to celebrate the birth of their son and grandson, Obed. Indeed, Ruth, Boaz, and Obed make it into an official record of Jesus’ community of belonging in the opening genealogy in Matthew’s gospel. In a list of men with largely unpronounceable names, Ruth is one of five women mentioned, along with Tamar, Rahab, “the wife of Uriah” or Bathsheba, and “Mary, of whom Jesus was born.” Moreover, Ruth is named as the great-grandmother of Israel’s King David.

“... and Boaz, the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.”

### Matthew 1.5

Jesus himself offers more instruction in the claims that communities make. Throughout the gospels, his detractors claimed that he was “a glutton, a drunkard, a *friend* of tax-collectors and sinners” (Matthew 11.19, Luke 7.34). Ancient etiquette explains the slur. Custom in the Ancient Near East dictates that *friends* were the people you ate and drank with, and the people you ate and drank with were your *friends*. The cultural math is clear: Jesus ate with these people, he drank with them; therefore, he was their *friend*.

As far as his enemies were concerned, Jesus was friends with all the “wrong” kinds of people. Perhaps they secretly wished Jesus had claimed them as his friends; perhaps they feared the people he actually did claim as his friends and the trouble this crowd might create. Whatever his enemies thought, Jesus’ friends had a particular relationship with him, one that had its own claims. In John’s gospel, Jesus outlined the claims of friendship: “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father” (John 15.15). Servants follow rules; they have to be told what to do. Friends follow relationships; they know what needs to be done.

You’ve probably sung the old hymn “What a friend we have in Jesus.” Jesus models a more radical understanding of friendship than the hymn allows.

- » What does your friendship with Jesus look like? Who is at your table? How about the friend of your congregation? Who’s at your table?
- » How do you – or how could you – live into that relationship in your own life? In your congregation?

Here are some exercises that invite reflection on the relationships and communities of belonging that animate your calling and your congregation’s calling. These exercises also invite you to think people who’ve shaped your life in formative and transformative ways.



## Exercise 1 – Name your “peeps/people”

Read [Ruth 1-18](#).

Ruth chooses to belong to one community; she rejects another. Have you ever made a similar decision? What was at stake?

We are all part of communities or groups that claim us, communities that we claim. It could be a family, a congregation, a faith tradition, a sports team, a choral group. For example, I’m a Lutheran, and my faith formation has trained me to see everyone as “neighbor,” not “friend,” not “stranger,” and certainly not “enemy” or “threat.” As a wise, old priest told me, “for a pickpocket, all the world’s a pocket. But for a Christian, all the world’s a neighbor.” Being a Christian means belonging to a particular community that orients around certain values, like service, justice, hospitality, and compassion.

- » List three communities you claim.
- » What’s a value or core commitment you learned by belong to each community?
- » Is there a ritual or practice you share?
- » How did you make this value your own?

## Exercise 2 – Name your mentors – Three snapshots

In his book *Let Your Life Speak* (2000), Parker Palmer writes that “the ancient human question ‘Who am I?’ leads inevitably to the equally important question ‘Whose am I?’”—for there is no selfhood outside of relationships (p. 17). Describe three people whom you believe have help or have helped you be your “best self.” For each, think about:

- » How did you meet this person and how long have you known each other? Tell a brief story that captures your relationship.
- » What’s one value or core commitment you’ve learned from this person and how did you learn it?
- » How has this relationship made you a better person or focused your calling?

Your snapshots can be written or oral. If you can and if it’s appropriate, supply a photo.

In conclusion, think of yourself as a mentor to others. Whom do you mentor? When have you heard someone say: “I feel like I can tell you anything.” Or “I can be my best self around you.” Share that story.

## Session 5: What's My Story?

**We all have a story to tell – what's yours? This final question of calling highlights the narrative character of human life.**

We live in history like fish live in water. As creatures of memory and hope, we remember a past and we long for a future. We're hard-wired to connect the dots to the present moment. We make sense of our lives by telling stories. Those stories have a beginning, a middle, and a next chapter. Even if every story does not end with the words "...and they lived happily ever after," each story could begin with words like "Once upon a time...", "In the beginning...", or even, "And..."

German-born American poet Lisel Mueller reflects on the enduring importance of stories in a poem, "[Why We Tell Stories](#)."

Read or listen to it.

**What's my story?** Addressing this question invites each of us to distinguish between the stories that others tell about us from the stories that we want to tell ourselves about ourselves. Remember Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who became a double agent in the struggle against Adolf Hitler? His family told stories about him, which probably went something like this: "He's a bright boy. Look how well he did in school! He'll surely become a doctor or an attorney." Instead, the story Bonhoeffer told about himself was quite different. Instead of law or medicine, he studied theology. He went on to teach in the United States, returning to Germany as war broke out to work in military intelligence as a spy for Allied Armies. He was arrested, imprisoned, and executed as part of a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Bonhoeffer's story does not have a happy ending; rather, it ends in resurrection. Looking back over a story he authored himself, Bonhoeffer concluded: "Whoever I am, O God, Thou knowest, I am Thine."

- » Think about the stories telegraphed by others in judgment like "He's a loser" or "She's a bright star." Have you ever had to content with false or partial stories others tell about you?
- » Have you ever told false or partial stories about others?
- » Have you ever told false or partial stories about yourself?
- » What's your congregation's story? Do you all tell it the same way?

The project of each of our lives is to distinguish the stories others tell about us from the story we want to tell about ourselves. Your own story may be different from the stories other people tell about you; it may even be different from stories you too often tell yourself about yourself, particularly if they

shame, demean, or simply reinforce a falsehood. In authoring your own story, a story that's authentic and gives life, you claim agency.

Narrative shapes individuals; it also shapes communities. Stories have powerful significance in Judaism. In absence of a stable homeland, Jews located themselves in stories. As we will see, the story of the exodus from Egypt, the *Haggadah*, is probably *the* central story in Judaism. The story is re-told every year at Passover around the seder meal. Remembering this story of liberation, Jews are literally re-membered into a community of promise.

Author Jonathan Safran Foer talks about passing on that central story to his young son. Bed-time was also story-time, and he always read fairy-tales or told stories from his own childhood. But his son's favorite stories featured biblical characters, particularly the story of Moses, prophet and liberator. I'll let Foer tell the story in his own words:

"A few nights ago, after hearing about the death of Moses for the umpteenth time – how he took his last breaths overlooking a promised land that he would never enter – my son leand his still wet head against my shoulder.

'Is something wrong?' I asked, closing the book. He shook his head.

'Are you sure?' Without looking up, he asked if Moses was a real person.

'I don't know,' I told him, 'but we're related to him.'"

Another Jewish author and Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel (1928-2016) underscores the importance of narrative in the lives of communities. In *The Gates of the Forest* (1964), Wiesel relates an old Hasidic tale about the power of stories. When misfortune threatened the Jews, the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov would go to a certain place in the forest, light a fire, say a special prayer, and the crisis would be averted. Over the years, the rabbi's successors would confront crises, but the next one forgot the place in the forest, another forgot the prayer, and still another forgot how to light the fire. Still, they did what they could remember, and the crisis would be averted. Finally, crisis came to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn. He sat in his armchair, head in his hands, and wept, "I am unable to light the fire. I do not know the prayer. I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient." It was, and the crisis was averted. Wiesel concluded: "God made man because he loves stories."

Wiesel's words moved a young Afghani Muslim woman to tell her own story as one of being "between two worlds." Her family had fled Afghanistan only a few years before, leaving behind relatives, friends, and a homeland wracked by war. She narrated stories from two communities that claimed her, the country she'd left behind and the country she belonged to now. A gifted photographer, she illustrated them with her own photos, incorporating links to Afghani music and film. As she situated her own story in the stories of the two nations she claimed, she discovered that

she had a story to tell.

## Thinking biblically

The Hebrew bible begins with stories of creation, “In the beginning, God...” The bible goes on to narrate covenants between God and God’s people, e.g., covenants with Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Moses and the Hebrew people. Alongside laws governing relationships to God and to the rest of the creation (*halakah*), there are stories (*haggadah*). Indeed, even before it starts commanding or forbidding anything, the Ten Commandments telegraphs a story of liberation. Here, God is the storyteller. This foundational story establishes the context for all the commandments that follow.

“I am the Lord your God,  
who brought you out of the land of Egypt,  
out of the house of slavery...”

Exodus 20:2

This story-telling God created the cosmos. Remember the opening lines of Genesis:

“In the beginning...” It’s the opening line for a great story, so good that the author of John’s gospel would steal draws on the first words of Genesis to narrate another creation story, this one about the creation of discipleship. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (John 1.1) The echo is intentional. The word God spoke to bring order out of chaos, light out of darkness, dry land out of a tumult of waters has now come to earth. That God who brought the Hebrew people out of the land of Egypt now has become incarnate and lives among us, liberation in the flesh. The incarnation is a judgment against all forms of slavery in our midst.

What’s your story? All of the other questions of calling come together in this final question. Probing it invites you and your congregation to think about the story you tell yourselves and others about who you are, where you are, who’s with you, and who or what you belong to. Tell your own story is a powerful way of “showing up in the world.”

## Exercise 1 – Creating a public leadership narrative

Activist, organizer, and teacher Marshall Ganz locates his own vocation at the intersection of three overlapping stories:

- » the story of self,
- » the story of us, and
- » the story of “now.”

Read his brief essay, "[Why Stories Matter](#)," with particular attention to how Ganz pulls these stories together in a public leadership narrative.

## Story of self

Everyone has a story of self. That story can be told differently at different points in our lives, depending on circumstance or audience or insight. Ganz talks about growing up as the son of a rabbi. Words from the Passover seder deeply affected him, "You were once a slave in Egypt." He had to leave his childhood home in California, but those words never left him.

For your story, think of one major challenge you faced and describe how you coped with it. Introduce your story with a summary: "Here's how I learned the importance of . . ." Then, narrate the challenge and how you handled it. Conclude by returning to what you learned, how it marks you as a person of faith and public leader, and why it's important to share.

You may have already told part of this story in your "[This I Believe](#)" statement.

## Story of us

We are all part of communities or groups that claim us, communities that we claim. It could be a family, a faith tradition, a sports team or choral group. Belonging to a particular community orients people toward certain values, which telegraph to its members a reason or purpose for being in the world. As the son of a rabbi, Ganz lived inside the story of the exodus from Egypt, a land of slavery and house of bondage. Not surprisingly, he found himself in the civil rights movement in the 1960s, part of another exodus from slavery.

You named some of your communities in the "[Name your 'peeps'/people](#)" exercise. Go back and review that list. Identify one value you learned being in this community, tell the story of how you learned it and made it your own.

## Story of "now"

Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of "the fierce urgency of now," his way of identifying the gap between the way things are in the world and the way they should be. Philosophers formulate this as the difference between what is – and what ought to be.

Identify one of those gaps that you are particularly concerned with: climate change, racism, poverty, the achievement gap. How did you become aware of this problem (story of self)?

Now, tell a story of how your core commitments (story of self) and community values (story of us) help you address "the fierce urgency of now." In your tagline from the first set of exercises, you may already have the title!