

## Claiming our Identity: Called

Isaiah 49:1-7

John 1:29-42

Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green

January 19, 2014

As the daughter of a seminary professor and a mother with a yen for travel, I had been all over the world by the time I got married but I had never seen lupines. The year my husband and I got married and moved to New Hampshire, I saw my first lupines: tall purple, blue, lavender and pink flowers. I first noticed them in people's perennial gardens, but when we ventured north along the coast and up into Maine, I started to see them growing wild--whole stands of lupines growing along the side of the road or in sandy open fields.

Around that time I was also given a copy of Barbara Cooney's American Book Award winning children's picture book, Miss Rumphius, which tells the story of the Lupine Lady. Here is how it begins:

*The Lupine Lady lives in a small house overlooking the sea. In between the rocks around her house grow blue and purple and rose-colored flowers. The Lupine Lady is little and old. But she has not always been that way. I know. She is my great-aunt, and she told me so.*

*Once upon a time she was a little girl named Alice, who lived in a city by the sea. From the front stop she could see the wharves and the bristling masts of tall ships. Many years ago her grandfather had done to America on a large ship.*

*Now he worked in the shop at the bottom of the houses making figureheads for the prows of ships, and carving Indians out of wood to put in front of cigar stores. For Alice's grandfather was an artist. He painted pictures, too, of sailing ships and places across the sea. When he was very busy, Alice helped him put in the skies.*

*In the evening Alice sat on her grandfather's knee and listened to his stories of faraway places. When he had finished, Alice would say, "When I grow up, I too will go to faraway places, and when I grow old, I too will live beside the sea."*

*"That is all very well, little Alice," said her grandfather, "but there is a third thing you must do."*

*"What is that?" asked Alice.*

*"You must do something to make the world more beautiful," said her grandfather.*

*"All right," said Alice. But she did not know what that could be.*

*In the meantime Alice got up and washed her face and ate porridge for breakfast. She went to school and came home and did her homework.*

*And pretty soon she was grown up. 1*

The story goes on to tell how Great Aunt Alice, known by others as Miss Rumphius, set out to do the three things she had told her grandfather she was going to do. She left home and became a librarian, and after helping people find books about faraway places, she traveled to a tropical island, climbed tall mountains, journeyed through deserts and tropical forests. Once when she was getting off of a camel she hurt her back.

*"Well, I have certainly seen faraway places," she said. "Maybe it is time to find my place by the sea."* And it was. And she did. Outside her new house by the sea she planted a few seeds in the stony ground and was almost perfectly happy.

*"But there is still one more thing I have to do," she said. "I have to do something to make the world more beautiful." But what?*

The next spring, the seeds she planted in the stony ground came up and bloomed. A whole year passed, and when her back was finally feeling much better, she took a walk up over a hill and there on the other side was an large patch of blue and purple and rose colored lupines! The wind and the birds had helped spread the seed!

It was then that she had a wonderful idea. She hurried home and got out her seed catalogues and ordered five bushels of lupine seed. And when the seed arrived, she took pockets full of it out on walks every day all summer, scattering it along highways and down country lanes. She flung handfuls of seeds around the schoolhouse and back of the church, she tossed them into hollows and along stone walks.

The next spring there were lupines everywhere.

Great Aunt Alice, Miss Rumphius, had done the third, the most difficult thing of all!

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Great children's books speak to us throughout our lives. Whenever I think deeply and want to speak about the biblical notion of God's call, I always come around to the story of little Alice who grew up to be the Lupine Lady.

As a child Alice dreamed of doing some wonderful things when she grew up. All children do this. But Alice had a grandfather who taught her to add something greater to her dreams. "That is all very well, little Alice," he said to the child on his lap, "but there is a third thing you must do."

Her grandfather assigned her a task to add to her dreams. In this way, Alice grew up with a sense of purpose beyond personal fulfillment. In the church, we call this a vocation. Or in plain English, a calling.

Alice, Miss Rumphius, became the Lupine Lady because an important adult in her life gave her what sounds to me like religious instruction. The important adult in her life didn't say, "you can do anything you want. You can be anything you want to me." He gave instruction. "There is a third thing you must do." "You must do something to make the world more beautiful."

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This is the second of three sermons I am preaching during the month of January on Christian identity. Last Sunday I gave you a one word answer to the question, "who are you?" Who are you? *Baptized*.

This week, I add a second word, and that word is *called*. We are baptized because God has invited us--called us--into a relationship and God has made it possible for us to belong to a covenant people and God will make it possible for us to understand some of what this means as we grow in wisdom and faith.

We are baptized because God's inscrutable purposes include us! God's grand plan, whatever it is, calls for our participation. We are baptized because God's kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven won't just happen one day while we sit around eating bon bons, but is something we are supposed to help make happen.

We are baptized because God loves us. God is not the over indulgent parent who says you can have anything you want and you can grow up to be or do whatever you want. Rather, God loves us *with instruction*, teaching us to seek something beyond personal fulfillment with the time that has been allotted to us.

To get even more to the point, each of us should consider ourselves called to ministry from the moment of our baptism. Each of us should consider ourselves called by God to ministry from the moment of our baptism.

Remember that in our Presbyterian tradition, ministry is something that we all do. Mine is a ministry of Word and Sacrament. Yours is a ministry of everything else. Your ministries are teaching children to read and write, providing healthcare, building businesses that provide jobs and services, and so on. Together we generate the particular ministries of this church. You cook for the community and provide space for recovering alcoholics and addicts to support each other to stay clean and sober. You organize yourselves into choirs and teams and get coffee on the back table and pay visits to elderly folks and keep the finances of the church orderly and transparent.

You were called to ministry from the moment you entered into a covenant relationship with God, from the moment your parents presented you to receive God's promise, and sealed again when you confirmed your baptism and took your vows as a church member. Discovering your calling is like discovering your self, but not exactly. It is better described as *discovering a purpose beyond self for all that is uniquely you*.

Maybe you don't think of yourself called to ministry. Well, if you don't think of yourself called to ministry, welcome to a very large club that includes just about everybody in the Bible and most of my favorite people. Not *feeling* called to ministry never stopped a person from being called. You might as well know that.

Furthermore, you are, we are, called to ministry not in isolation but as a community and a worldwide communion. Therefore,

Number (1) listen carefully.

As Alice listened to her grandfather's instruction, we must listen carefully to the scriptures, so that we interpret them faithfully and not according to our own whims and prejudices. Note in today's Gospel reading all of the careful listening that goes on. John the Baptist has two of his

disciples with him when they see Jesus. "Look, here is the lamb of God," says John, at which point John's disciples leave him and go with Jesus.

This is not a minor detail! Two of John the Baptist's disciples ditched John to follow Jesus. Why? Because they were listening. They listened to their own teacher say, "he is greater than I am." Andrew goes on to tell his brother Simon, "we have found the Messiah." Simon comes to see Jesus for himself, and the rest as they say is history. Simon gets a new name, Peter. He gets a new life. He gets a martyr's death.

Careful listening, careful, careful listening can pry us away from our current loyalties and bind us to Christ for Christ's purposes. Careful listening brought the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. out of the ivory tower of academia and out of the circumscribed life of a parish minister to the picket lines and the Birmingham jail cell and the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

You also are called to ministry. Therefore listen carefully.

Number (2) Ask questions. If necessary, ask dumb questions.

Consider those disciples again. They've just been told Jesus is the Lamb of God, and they've left John the Baptist behind on the beach to go with Jesus instead. Their first words to Jesus are in the form of a question, and the question is pretty pedestrian. "Rabbi, where are you staying?" they ask. Not what does it mean that you are the lamb of God? Or, what must we do to be saved? Or anything like that. Just, where are you staying?

Come and see, Jesus replies. Their innocuous question leads to a next step, the step of companionship with Jesus, and step by step, their relationship grows, their understanding grows, their sense of vocation develops, their ministry unfolds.

You are called to ministry. Therefore do not be afraid to ask questions. Any question will do.

Number (3) Don't hesitate.

You were called to ministry from the moment of your baptism. Therefore do not wait one more minute. Not one single minute longer. Your ministry is happening now. The question isn't whether to be involved in ministry, but how. Not whether, but how.

God's inscrutable plan has you in it. Your life is happening now and you don't know how long it will last. God's inscrutable plan has you in it filling some vital role that is yours and no one else's, now, already, and all you need to figure out is your next step.

The church has work for you to do. And so does the world.

The book, Miss Rumphius, ends this way:

*My Great Aunt Alice, Miss Rumphius, is very old now. Her hair is very white. Every year there are more and more lupines. Now they call her the Lupine Lady. Sometimes my friends stand with me outside her gate, curious to see the old, old lady who planted the fields of lupines. When she invites us in, they come slowly. They think she is the oldest woman in the world. Often she tells us stories of faraway places.*

*"When I grow up," I tell her, "I too will go to faraway places and come home to live by the sea,"*

*"That is all very well, little Alice," says my aunt, "but there is a third thing you must do."*

*"What is that?" I ask.*

*"You must do something to make the world more beautiful."*

*"All right," I say.*

*But I do not know yet what that can be.*

What is your third thing, the thing you must do to make the world more beautiful?

Or, in the words of the poet Mary Oliver,

*Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?*<sup>2</sup>

To the glory of God. Amen.

~Rev. Ruth L. Boling

<sup>1</sup>Cooney, Barbara. Miss Rumphius, (Viking Penguin: New York, 1982).

<sup>2</sup>Oliver, Mary. "The Summer Day," from The Truro Bear and Other Adventures: Poems and Essays, (Beacon Press: 2008).