

THERE IS WORK TO BE DONE

by Sarah Stewart

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There is work to be done, I can hear my Savior calling. There is work to be done.

Immediately after Jesus' baptism, he was led out into the desert by the Spirit for 40 days without food. When he returned to Galilee straight from the desert, he went to Nazareth. *Luke 4* tells us that he went to the synagogue, took the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and read this passage.

*The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
Because he has anointed me
To preach the good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom to the prisoners
And recovery of sight for the blind,
To release the oppressed,
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

Sarah Stewart presented this testimony on August 7, 2009, at the Midwest Region New Baptist Covenant meeting in Norman, Oklahoma. TBC is publishing it with her permission.

This was his very first public statement. When he received the Holy Spirit, he proclaimed there is work to be done. Jesus didn't stop and complain to God about how hard it was in the desert. I don't see a long passage in Luke of Jesus describing how hungry he was or just how hard it was to say "no" to those temptations. He didn't even ask God why he would allow him to go through something so painful. Each time I read this passage, I have to stop and wonder why he didn't do those things that I know I would have done. Other than the obvious answer that he was God, I also have come to understand that he was so filled with love for his people that nothing else mattered. There was work to be done, I can hear my Savior calling.

I am here tonight to testify about what God has done and is doing in my life. The drumbeat I hear throughout my journey is my Savior calling "there is work to be done." I did not receive my call to ministry as others describe receiving their calling. My peers describe a moment in their lives when God's divine hand reached down and set them aside, a specific moment in time when they accepted their call to ministry. My calling did not come in a grand moment; rather, my call has come through a journey with God. Instead of surrendering to God once and for all in one glorious moment, I have heard God asking me to follow. My call has come through a thousand small "yeses." From the first moment I said "yes" to God as an 8-year-old, I have heard my Savior calling "there is work to be done."

The next time God asked me to follow him, I was 17 years old. A woman in my home church asked me to help her teach a Bible study for 6th- and 7th-grade girls. God did two things in response to my "yes." First, he pulled me into ministry for the first time. He used that experience to shape me, mold me, and prepare me for the next time he would ask me to follow. Second, and most important, he showed me that this Bible study was more about his unquenchable love for those girls and the work he wanted to do in their lives than it was about me. It was an honor to be a part of God's work, but make no mistake that it was about God's work. I can hear my Savior calling, there is work to be done.

As long as I can remember, I have asked God who he created me to be. As a child, I dreamed of being the first woman president and changing the world. As I grew older, I dreamed of being a doctor and saving lives. I kept listening and kept dreaming, knowing that God would someday show me who he created me to be. What I started to realize was that God would ask me to follow him. *That* is who I was created to be. He wanted me to say "yes" when he called, and it wasn't necessarily my concern where we were going.

During my freshman year of college at the University of Oklahoma, God asked me to say "yes" again. I overheard a friend of mine asking my roommate whether she would be interested in volunteering with the youth group at his church. My roommate wasn't interested, but I could hear God saying, "there is work to be done." I spent the next 4 years working with that youth group. In that small moment when I decided to say "yes" to God, he began to pull me into ministry. Yes, it was in some strange person's house – and yes, the friend didn't really even ask me . . . but I heard God say to me, "I have so much I want to do in that church and in that youth group. Are you willing for me to use you?" I found a church family, a church home.

God brought an entire community alongside me to affirm what God was doing in me and through me. It was in those 4 years of serving that youth group that I started to understand that God had created me to follow him as a minister of the gospel. My call came in the midst of community and through the community. God used the church to teach me what it meant to serve him with all of me. He brought men and women alongside me to affirm what God was doing and to work alongside me. It was not about me, it was about God's undeniable love for those youth. Our common purpose and common heart was to allow God to use us to transform those teenage lives. I served as both the youth intern and then as the interim youth minister during those 4 years. It was through that process of saying "yes" to God that he began to open my eyes.

Most things about ministry came to me naturally. I could organize almost anything, whether it was an event or a large group of teenagers. I could teach Bible studies, encourage volunteers, and love on kids. The one thing that paralyzed me was speaking in front of the church. A few months before I left that church to go to seminary, the new pastor informed the staff that we would all take turns teaching on Sundays and Wednesday nights. I did everything short of lying to get out of that. I was the very last minister on staff to teach. So I spent several days preparing and several days sure that I was going to be sick the moment I got in front of those people. But I am here to testify that, in that moment when I finally said "yes" to God, he began to reveal my calling. God used the church to affirm his call on my life. It wasn't about me, or my age or gender; the people of God simply stood together in response to God.

The next time I said "yes" to God, I surrendered all of the plans that I had made for how I was going to serve God. This time, my journey led me to Texas to begin seminary. At that point, I knew I was called to ministry, but I could not see how God would use me. It was the community

at Truett that walked alongside me as I discovered my call. I began to understand, as I served in a local church, that God had created me to shepherd his people. I can remember the first time I was brave enough to utter aloud that I believed I was called to pastoral ministry. It was in a covenant group that I was mentoring. The moment I uttered those words, a middle-aged woman sitting across from me interrupted me with a crack in her voice and said, “me too.” We spent the next 3 years walking together, finding courage in each other, and preparing for the ministry that God had planned for us.

Truett opened its doors to us, affirming that they believed that God has a calling on our lives. They trained us, equipped us, prepared us, and encouraged us to continue to say “yes” to God. Our presence at Truett was an act of faith – both on our part and on the professors’ part. They poured their lives into us, not knowing whether we would ever have a place to serve. They walked with us, preparing us for the next time God would ask us to say “yes.”

We served faithfully in our local church families, even though the churches we served could receive only part of the ministry to which we were called. God was so faithful to open doors for us to pursue our calling of preaching. We were given opportunities to preach in the chapel at Truett. A small African Methodist Episcopal church in Waco opened its doors to us so that we could live out what God was doing inside us. Time and again, God opened doors that seemed permanently closed.

Upon graduating from Truett, my friend Lillian Hinds was called as pastor of Meadow Oaks Baptist Church in Temple, Texas. It was as if the entire community was stunned that God actually fulfilled his calling on her life. My husband and I were invited to serve as ministry residents at First Baptist Church of Oklahoma City. That church is currently giving us the opportunity to live out our call to ministry. They have affirmed my calling and chose to ordain me in April 2008. God has placed me in a church that is willing to walk with me as I say “yes” to God. I spend each moment serving God preparing for the next time he asks me to follow.

God has been so gracious to walk with me. He has gently prepared me each step of the way to say “yes” to the next time. God has spoken to me and called me in the midst of community. Often I find fear creeping in, telling me it is going to be too hard. I am afraid of the rejection I have felt and will feel from others, and I am saddened that my calling will be a stumbling block to many. But I am here to testify that each and every time that happens, my savior gently reminds me that there is work to be done. There is so much work to be done.

The theme for tonight is a call for unity among Baptists. My calling is a *testimony* of unity among Baptists. Here tonight are members from every community of believers that God has used to shape me and call me. My life is the product of churches that listened to God and walked alongside me as I sought to live out my calling. God used these men and women to remind me that there is work to be done. My prayer for you tonight is that, no matter how you were born, regardless of your race, gender, or economic status, I pray that you would have the courage to say “yes.” Can you hear our Savior calling, there is work to be done?