

**Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704**

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### **Claimed By God**

Isaiah 43:1

In his book *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President*, Allen Guelzo describes the journey of Abraham Lincoln from an unsuccessful storekeeper in the failing village of New Salem to a promising young attorney in the growing capital city of Springfield. These years were for Lincoln a time of self discovery when a strong sense of vocation took root within him. Lawyers in the 1840s were tested by the experience of riding the circuit. Twice a year judges and lawyers traveled from courthouse to courthouse through eight counties of Central Illinois. They stayed on the road together until all the cases had been completed. This meant they were usually away from home from mid-March to mid-June and from early September to the first of December. Guelzo described the circuit in these words:

This wandering flock of lawyers became its own little society, thrown together over the endless flat miles with no one's company but their own, pulling up in small court towns when in two or three days they had to connect with clients and take depositions or make declarations or interview witnesses, sharing meals and usually beds in flea trap boarding houses. William Herndon recalled... 'they met each other at the bar and on the stump and fought it out like strong brave men... yet... these men were at all times personal friends, bearing no ill will' and it was in just this atmosphere... where 'manners were rude, but genial, kind, and friendly'... that Lincoln felt most at home. He had found for the first time a society of equals that he could marvel at for its own respectability, and he would be remembered years later as the only Springfield lawyer who enjoyed circuit riding so much that he rode both the spring and fall terms of the circuits (*Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President*, pages 82-83).

A similar journey to self understanding is described in the 43<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Isaiah. There the prophet addresses the Israelites who live in exile. His purpose is to prepare them for a journey. The long nightmare of exile is about to come to an end. The time of their release is at hand. They will soon be making the journey home. But this journey will not mean very much if they do not understand the vocation that God has given them. They have been claimed by God for a very special task. They are to be a servant community which lives to carry out God's ministry of compassion. It is that vocation which will be their source of fulfillment and joy. Their journey home is not about geography. It is about learning who they are in the eyes of God.

We find Jesus making the same journey in the third chapter of Luke. When Jesus comes out of the water after being baptized by John the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descends on him like a dove. John Calvin wrote that the dove descending on Christ is a sign of his servant ministry. He is not to be the kind of messiah who deals in political or military power. His power is more subtle and much more profound. It is the power of one who serves. The gospels tell us that Jesus' baptism is a moment when the nature of his vocation becomes clear.

We all experience times which reveal to us who we are. The 1935 film *I Live My Life* stars Brian Aherne and Joan Crawford. It follows the romance of two people who have grown up in very different worlds. Aherne plays a young man who finds joy in his work as an archeologist. When he

becomes engaged to a wealthy young woman played by Joan Crawford her family convinces him to give up his vocation so that he can become a highly paid executive in the large corporation which is owned by the family. He convinces himself that he can do more for archeology by becoming wealthy enough to underwrite important projects.

But a few days in this high paying job convinces him he has made a huge mistake. He is suffocating in his luxurious office. In desperation he cries out, "I can't do this! I'm an archaeologist!" In that moment he recognizes the powerful claim his vocation has on him. He resigns from his new position. His fiancé is bitterly disappointed by his decision and threatens to break it off. But in the end she realizes that one of her strongest reasons for loving this man is that he is the only one she knows who doesn't worship money.

God is at work in all of our relationships and all of our decisions. God is calling us by name and challenging us to be part of his ministry of compassion. His claim on us is one that cannot be dismissed.