Waiting for the Call

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My Baptist preacher father, Eldred Taylor, surrendered to the call when he was thirteen years old. That’s how you say it. The call. And surrendered. You get the idea from such language that God has mounted a long and fierce assault on a person and met with a sustained and stubborn resistance. But, in the end (against God, what choice do you have?), the person surrenders. The Bible is full of stories in which God calls out to one person or another. He tells them what he wants. Sometimes they do it right away, sometimes they resist, but sooner or later they all surrender.

We were Southern Baptists. This is the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, with a current membership that tops 16 million. A worldwide church, the highest concentration of Southern Baptists occurs in the Bible Belt. Sometimes when people hear the words “Baptist preacher” they picture tiny churches in the middle of nowhere and uneducated country preachers. That was not us. Both my parents were college and seminary graduates. My father pastored a large church (nearly two thousand members) in a small town (about ten thousand people), which means we were highly visible members of this community. When I say that I grew up as a Baptist preacher’s daughter in a small town in Ken-
tucky, I always believe I’ve said something fundamental about my identity.

When I was about ten years old, I desperately wanted a call. I wanted to be chosen. I felt certain I had special work to do here on earth, and I wanted God to let me in on what it was. God, I believed, had a plan for my life. When he got good and ready, he was going to reveal it to me. In our Southern Baptist world, God didn’t call girls to be preachers, so I wasn’t listening for that. Still I was pretty sure he wanted me for something nobody else could do, something that involved plenty of action. I was chock full of pep and big ideas. He would surely send me to do something remarkable.

I persuaded myself that God was calling me to be a missionary. This girls could do. After all, the special end of year donation for foreign missions was called the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering. Lottie Moon was a famous unmarried lady who had gone to China in 1873 and pretty much single-handedly launched Southern Baptist foreign mission work. She stood only four foot three inches tall, but she was full of stamina and spunk. She turned down a marriage proposal and left behind home and family to head off to China to spread the word. She had lots of adventures and endured all kinds of hardships in order to do God’s work. Maybe it should have worried me to learn that she died of starvation because she would not eat while the people she served endured famine, but it did not. We all looked up to Lottie Moon. Each December we put a big drawing of a thermometer up on the wall of the church and watched the temperature rise as the gifts poured in toward our Lottie Moon Christmas Offering goal. Sometimes instead of a thermometer we had a map of the world with lights scattered over it that were gradually illuminated, one by one, as our gifts lit up the world. Lottie Moon proved that God was just as willing to call women as men.

When I was about eleven, I wrote to the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board in Richmond, Virginia, and told them about my call. They were happy and sent me a welcoming letter and lots of materials describing the work Baptists were doing in various locations on the globe.

In my bedroom, I devoted one of my three desk drawers to Foreign Mission Board materials and correspondence. There were slick
brochures and shiny maps dotted with Southern Baptist Foreign Mission sites. They confirmed that in fact women worked all over the world as teachers, nurses, and doctors. Some had husbands and children, but others, like Lottie, just launched off on their own. They unpacked bags full of Bibles and soap and bandages and got busy making more light in the world. One brochure I received explained how much education and preparation missionaries had to have. I could see that this work was not for the faint of heart.

Oh, how I wanted to be called. If you’ve got a call, everything you do takes on a certain weight. My mother and sister Jeannie and I believed in this and waited for God’s instructions, but our calls seemed only for supporting parts. Daddy was Diana Ross, and we were the Supremes. Not when the three were really singing out full throttle, more like when Diana was letting it rip and Flo and Mary were standing behind her smiling, snapping their fingers, and humming along, like they couldn’t quite believe how good she sounded.

We worked hard at making Daddy look good. We politely answered the phone and took messages. We discussed his sermons and the work of the church at nearly every meal. Sometimes Mother helped him refine his analysis of a particular passage of scripture. Our entire family served as examples for the community, and we never lost sight of the fact that they were watching us. This wasn’t hard to remember, even for a kid, because the parsonage where we lived was situated right smack next door to the church and had three enormous picture windows. “We live in a goldfish bowl,” my mother snapped nearly every evening as she turned on the lamps and drew the heavy drapes shut with a magnificent swoosh.

Metaphor and concrete fact kept close company. We lived on Main Street, in the literal and figurative shadow of the church.

I had been only seven years old when Daddy’s call swooped the family up from Louisville and delivered us to the little town of Somerset, nestled in the foothills of the Appalachians. Surrounded by farms, Somerset was the county seat and, despite its small size, the largest town in five counties. Although only 130 miles from Louisville, it was, in many respects, a whole world away, with a dialect and culture all its own.

When we pulled up in front of the parsonage, we thought it was even better than they had told us. The red brick house was huge. It had eleven
rooms. Inside lots of people bustled around fixing it up for the new preacher and his family. Carpenters, electricians, and painters were scattered throughout, but the real power seemed to be in the hands of a committee of churchwomen.

Mother looked at paint chips and fabric swatches and made decisions with a brisk dispatch and an air of authority I had never seen in her before. The walls in the four enormous front rooms, she told the churchwomen, would be painted mauve beige. It was a beautiful color with a beautiful name.

Mother selected a heavy mauve fabric for the thick drapes. Mrs. Tandy, the church member who would make the drapes, marched about like a tiny stout general, nodding briskly and measuring the windows. Her snapping dark eyes could take your measure and know exactly how many yards of fabric she would need to make you a nice Sunday dress.

Once we moved into the parsonage, it turned out to be harder to manage than it had looked and almost impossible to keep clean. The church, the parsonage, and a lot of other buildings in town were heated with black Kentucky coal, which, as it burned, produced a fine layer of soot that settled over every piece of furniture. This coal dust was joined by the exhaust blasts of hundreds of the cars and trucks that regularly downshifted in front of our house on the way up Harvey Hill. Main Street was also Highway 27, a major thoroughfare that brought plenty of roaring traffic. Our elegant crystal chandeliers, soot coated as they usually were and laborious to clean, came to be the bane of Mother’s existence. The half bath in the front hall had a commode that seemed to overflow every time company was coming or we were in a hurry to get out the door. The contents would drip through the floor and run down into the basement while Mother mopped furiously and spat Baptists swear words such as “Dad-blamed,” and “Confounded,” and “Plague take-commode!” To say the house was heated seems an exaggeration. During cold spells we would wear coats in the house and cut the fingertips out of old pairs of gloves so we could do our homework or practice piano.

Daddy’s previous job, Director of Missions and Evangelism for Kentucky Baptists, had kept him on the road a lot, traveling all over the state. Now he was home all the time but also working all the time. He wore a suit and tie seven days a week, and his “weekend” seemed to last only
from the end of Sunday evening service until early Monday morning, when he began working on the next week’s sermons (one for Sunday morning service, another for Sunday night). The family had to pack a weekend’s worth of relaxation into the hour and a half between the close of the evening service and bedtime. After church, Mother, Jeannie, and I raced home while Daddy finished shaking hands with the church members. Mother made popcorn or whipped up a pan of fudge. We opened the mahogany cabinet doors that encased our black and white television set (and which we had learned as children to slam shut whenever one of those nasty beer commercials came on). By the time Daddy walked in the door at nine o’clock, we were seated with our snacks, ready to watch Bonanza. We all loved that show. Those pesky Cartwright brothers, Adam, Hoss, and Little Joe, always getting into one scrape after another, Pa always there with a firm but gentle hand to make sure everything came out all right. The boys’ mothers (all three of them) were dead, and most any woman who fell for any of the Cartwright men soon met an untimely end, but this lack of females wasn’t really a problem. The male housekeeper, Hop Sing, cooked and did household chores. Pa, with loving authority, took care of everything else. This, Mother and Daddy said approvingly, was good wholesome entertainment, the kind the whole family could enjoy.

It never troubled any of us in those days that the boys who seemed in such desperate weekly need of Pa’s firm guidance were grown men, some decidedly middle aged, or that this admirably wholesome family represented, despite the occasional fleeting girlfriend, a curiously homosocial world. In the world of the sixties, a firm but loving patriarch was, I suppose, the sine qua non of a wholesome family life.

Mother and Jeannie and I were public figures in Somerset in ways we never had been back in Louisville. Once school began, I quickly figured out that being the preacher’s daughter made me different from other children in my class. My second-grade teacher, Miss Guffy, was a church member. I was a quick student and often finished my work early. I’d then look around to see who wanted to talk. “Jackie Taylor!” Miss Guffy barked. “Quit talking. What would your father think? You’re supposed to set an example.”

Not too crazy about small-town life, I soon began to beseech God to
call my father back to Louisville on the theory that if God had called him once God could call him twice. But God’s plans and mine never coincided on this point.

I asked my father how it was that he knew he was being called to preach. Did he hear a voice? Did he have a vision? When God called the boy Samuel, Samuel heard a voice call his name so distinctly that he thought his rabbi and master, Eli, was calling for help. Samuel ran to Eli three times before Eli, finally realizing that it was God calling, sent Samuel back to bed with instructions about what to say when God called once more. “Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth,” Samuel was told to reply.

Eldred Taylor had heard no voice. He just knew. He was filled with a conviction. God called him, loud and clear, voice or no, and then he just kept on calling, so my father never needed to question his call.

Daddy’s call was foreordained. An older brother had died at two years of age. His mother prayed to God that if he would give her another son she would give him back to God. Maybe she had been reading about Samuel’s mother, Hannah. Hannah was the one who had no children, the favorite wife of a man who had two wives. Hannah was downcast about her barren state. As a last resort, she prayed to God for a son, one she would give back. Evidently God liked this prayer because Hannah conceived. When Samuel came along, she kept him just long enough to get him weaned and then took him over to Eli to be raised in the service of God.

Like Hannah, Grandmother prayed and not long after became pregnant and had a son. Grandmother was a taciturn woman and didn’t tell my father about her pact with God. Maybe she figured it wasn’t her place to tell her son God’s and her business. Maybe she figured if God wanted him God would come and get him. She evidently held a mighty faith in God’s ability to manage God’s own affairs.

Her plan worked. My father publicly responded to his call at age thirteen at a special Thanksgiving service at Third Baptist in Owensboro, Kentucky. The church had a visiting preacher that day, and he gave a special invitation to anyone who felt the call. Baptist services almost always involve an invitation or what some Christian churches refer to as an altar call. The congregation sings a hymn, while the preacher stands at
the front of the sanctuary awaiting anyone who wants to come forward and acknowledge a decision to join the church or make what Baptists call a profession of faith. That day the invitation was especially addressed to young people who felt called by God to special service (preaching, mission work). Four or five young people stood up. Even when young Eldred made his call public, Grandmother kept her silence. She let many years go by before she divulged her role in Eldred’s call, and when she finally told, she didn’t tell my father; she told my mother. And then only after Eldred had grown up, gone to college, gotten married, graduated from the seminary, and been ordained as a preacher.

Jeannie and I were true believers at an early age. What other path could we have imagined? Jeannie, two years older than me, made “a profession of faith” and joined the church when she was six years old. Daddy baptized her, wearing a big white robe and dunking her (clad in a smaller white robe) all the way under the water in the baptismal font behind the choir loft. Later she came back out and sat on the pew with us, dressed again in her Sunday clothes, shivering slightly, her neatly parted hair dripping.

Watching all this, I was fascinated. At four years old, I knew I loved Jesus, but I hadn’t known children that young could join up. Baptists speak of “the age of accountability,” the age when a person realizes she is a sinner and makes a decision to become a believer. While this moment occurs at different ages for different individuals, Baptists often expect that young people will begin making professions of faith at the age of eight or nine. If a child reaches thirteen or fourteen years of age without such a decision, everyone starts to worry.

Once my sister joined the church, I waited to see what would happen next. When was Daddy going to talk to me about this important business? Weeks went by. He carried on with his work, often traveling around the state. I bided my time, expecting any moment we would have our talk. Finally, I took matters into my own hands. One afternoon I found him in his study, working on a sermon. “Daddy,” I asked him, “when are you going to talk to me about trusting Jesus?” He looked a little surprised, because he probably wasn’t quite sure that the age of accountability might extend down to four, but he laid aside the sermon he was writing and told me we could do it right then. He pulled out his
Bible, I sat in his lap, and he went through the New Testament verses that he had so often used to explain that Jesus loved us and had died for us, that we were all sinners, and that by trusting Jesus we could have him in our lives forever and be saved. It seemed really simple to me, an easy decision. He questioned me, trying to discern whether I understood what he was telling me. When he was satisfied that I did, he told me I could say the prayer that would invite Jesus into my life and make me a Christian. We knelt in his study, leaning on his desk chair, and I invited Jesus into my life. I was happy. I wanted to join the church at once, but Mother and Daddy thought me too young. They stalled. I waited as long as I could bear and then asked them again when I could join. Finally, when I had nosed past my fifth birthday, they made an appointment for me to talk to our Louisville pastor, Brother Hubbard. He, too, questioned me about my decision, but in the end, like Daddy, he agreed that I seemed to understand what this was about. And so, at age five, I became a member of St. Matthews Baptist Church and was baptized.

I wonder, now, what a decision like that means when taken by a five year old. How did I interpret the notion that I was a sinner in need of redemption? Surely my worst transgressions were on the order of coming to blows with my sister, refusing to eat my peas, and talking in church. As near as I can recall, I thought less about the sin than about God as a source of love and Jesus as my ever-present friend, yet I did fervently believe in a God who held us all to a mighty high standard, and I regularly asked forgiveness for not following him as closely as I believed I should.

Growing up in such a world, amid such stories, Jeannie and I felt pretty confident that we didn’t need to make any of our own big plans. God had it worked out already, our life’s work, our future husbands, how he was going to make use of us and the particular gifts he had bestowed on us so we could be helpful. All we had to do was study hard and stay faithful so when the call came we would be ready.

Jeannie has described the nine years she spent in Somerset as the time when her family kidnapped her and forced her to live as a hostage in a small town. By the eighth grade, nearly six feet tall and rail thin, she spent her spare time paging through fashion magazines and fantasizing about her eventual fame and fortune as a runway model. I’m not sure whether this life in the glamorous world of high fashion fit with her belief in her
still-to-be-revealed call or whether, as seems to me more likely, the two
dream worlds traveled parallel tracks, never really bumping into one
another.

As much as I hated the pressures of being a preacher’s kid, I loved the
church and really did want to be helpful. I sang every hymn with gusto,
proudly casting the hymnal aside and singing from memory. I stuck my
hand up each time the Sunday School teacher asked a Bible question,
eager with answers, glad to be right. I wanted to be a witness, helping to
win folks to the Lord. I would pick up tracts from the rack at the back of
the church that helpfully laid out the plan of salvation, intending to give
them to my friends at school.

But the moment never seemed right, and most of them already went to
our church. I worried that my peers might not know I was saved, since it
had all happened before we moved to Somerset. How was I going to win
my classmates to the Lord, if they didn’t even know I was a believer? I
hated the idea of going around talking about it. I resolved to lead by
example. Every couple of years I would come forward during the invita-
tion hymn at a revival service to rededicate my life to Christ. I didn’t have
much opportunity for any very significant sins, but this was one way I
could show my friends I was saved and wanted them to be too, without
having to sit them down and pepper them with Bible verses.

It seemed easier by far to imagine myself bearing witness in a far-off
land in another language. The career paths for women in Somerset were
few: schoolteacher, nurse, secretary. I wanted no part of any of these. As
a missionary, I could have a leadership role and travel about the globe.
God could use me and my big strong speaking voice.

I tried to divine just what country God was calling me to, poring over
the maps of Africa, China, and the Middle East. But I never got any clar-
ity on that point and gradually, as junior high gave way to high school, my
correspondence with the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board fal-
tered and then collapsed altogether. They were tactful. If you didn’t write
them, they didn’t write you. Which was smart. They didn’t want to take
a chance on recruiting someone who didn’t really have the call.