

# Disability, Vocation, and Prophetic Witness

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## Abstract

This paper builds on Frances Young's suggestion that people with profound intellectual disability have a prophetic vocation. It explores the idea of vocation using the experience of intellectual disability as a critical hermeneutic that brings to the fore a perspective that views vocation as something that includes all of the Body of Christ and not just the head. The intention is to offer a different more theologically and practically inclusive perspective on vocation that might enable us to create communities where each member's vocation was valued and enabled.

## Keywords

vocation, intellectual disability, disability, practical theology, knowledge of God, discipleship

*I've come to believe that persons with even the most profound limitations have a vocation to be a "sign" in the biblical sense: a prophetic sign pointing beyond themselves.*

—Frances Young<sup>1</sup>

In her book *Arthur's Call: A Journey of Faith in the Face of Severe Learning Disability*, Frances Young presents a moving and at times quite beautiful theological exploration of her experience with her son Arthur who lives with a profound intellectual disability (learning disability in the UK). Arthur was born with damage

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1. Frances Young, *Arthur's Call: A Journey of Faith in the Face of Severe Learning Disabilities* (London: SPCK, 2014), 157.

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to his brain. He was microcephalic (he had an abnormally small head) and would be dependent on others for the whole of his life. Young honestly and compassionately helps her readers to understand how difficult this was for her and her family and how tender the tension was between her vocation as an academic theologian and her life with her son for whom that aspect of her life would mean absolutely nothing. Arthur was deeply loved, but their journey together was not easy. Throughout the book Young offers a fascinating exploration of the nature of suffering and the need for anti-theodicy (a refusal to try to explain Arthur's presence by relating it to suffering), when it comes to thinking about disability and humanness. Disability should not be defined by suffering, and theological reflection on disability is not confined to speculative explanations of human suffering. There are other critically important ways in which disability helps us to understand humanness. For Young, vocation is a more productive way of thinking about severe intellectual disability.

In her chapter on Arthur's vocation, Young shifts her gaze towards the issue of vocation and calling. What does it mean to suggest that Arthur has a vocation? Young argues that Arthur and others who share similar experiences, have a prophetic vocation that can enable all of us together, to engage in a profound shift in values; a movement away from individualism, dominance, competitiveness, and violence, towards the possibility of community mutuality, faithful vulnerability, and Graceful love. All of us live in a creation that is broken but still beautiful. We need guides and prophetic wisdom to help us to grasp the nature of that beauty. It is not that we need to "learn from the disabled." The challenge is how we all can learn from one another in ways that take the inherent diversity of the Body of Jesus seriously, not as a metaphor but as a lived reality.

In this article I will build on Young's idea of prophetic vocation and try to offer a faithful understanding of profound intellectual disability as we might view it from the perspective of God's coming Kingdom. I will offer an alternative to hypercognitive vocational theologies that exclude people with the type of brain damage that Arthur lives with from their vocation. My intention is to offer a different, more theologically and practically inclusive perspective on vocation that enables us to think seriously about the calling of each part of the Body and not just the head.

## **From Pastoral Care to Discipleship**

One of the most important things that I try to teach my ministry students is that when they are thinking about issues around disability, they need to make sure they place disability in the correct category. It's interesting to watch the expectations that some of our students have in terms of the nature of their calling to ministry. The majority tend to be very interested in mission, evangelism, church growth, community building, and the nurturing of young people. All of these things are of course important. However, considerably fewer students are interested in things like ageing, dementia, and disability. The general assumption is that these things

fall under the category of “pastoral care” and “we have a pastoral care team that can deal with them!” However, I try to point out to them that to think in such ways is to make a fundamental category mistake. Elderly people, people with dementia, people with intellectual disabilities, are best understood as *disciples* with a *vocation* that is not invalidated and does not end because we are old or have some degree of brain damage. Pastoral care is of course important. We all need to be cared for. But discipleship and vocation are also profoundly important aspects of the Christian life with which we *all* need help in recognizing, nurturing, and sustaining throughout our lives. When we think in such a way the questions we ask are changed: What does it mean to love and to follow Jesus when you have forgotten who Jesus is? What does it mean to be a disciple with a vocation when you do not have the intellectual capacities that religion often demands for participation in the faith? If we miss the significance of this category realignment—from pastoral care to discipleship—we miss something crucial to the experience of disability and something vital for the enduring faithfulness of the Body of Christ. For current purposes we will focus on the latter question that resonates with Young’s claims around Arthur’s vocation: *What does it mean to be a disciple with a vocation when you do not have the intellectual capacities that religion often demands for participation in the faith?*

## On Becoming a Disciple

For many people with disabilities becoming a disciple is a reasonably straightforward process that is no different from the way that many other people become disciples. We learn who Jesus is and we make a commitment to live within the fullness of life that he promises to bring to us (John 10:10). The complexity emerges when we reflect on the lives of those among us whose disabilities prevent them from accessing life in all its fullness via standard intellectual means. Here many of the standard demands that religion makes in terms of what it means to be a disciple are deeply challenged. For current purposes we will focus on the lives of people living with profound intellectual disabilities; people with similar life experiences to Arthur’s. However, we should bear in mind that what follows also applies to people living with other forms of brain damage.

### *What Do We Need to Know and How Much Is Enough? Matthew’s Call*

In his book *Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer reflects on the call of Matthew and makes a rather surprising observation: *Matthew did not know anything about Jesus when he responded to that call.*<sup>2</sup> Bonhoeffer notices that in Matthew’s account of the disciple’s call there is no indication that he had prior knowledge:

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2. For a further development of the argument of this article see John Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefulness, and Gentle Discipleship* (Waco: Baylor, 2016).

... the call goes out, and without any further ado the obedient deed of the one called follows. The disciple's answer is not a spoken confession of faith in Jesus. Instead, it is the obedient deed. How is this direct relation between call and obedience possible? It is quite offensive to natural reason. Reason is impelled to reject the abruptness of the response. It seeks something to mediate it; it seeks an explanation. No matter what, some sort of mediation has to be found, psychological or historical.<sup>3</sup>

One could *infer* that Matthew had heard the rumors and that he was prepared to answer the call according to previous knowledge of who Jesus was. However, the text simply does not say that. To assume pre-knowledge within Mathew's call requires that we move behind and beyond the text and enter into speculative conversations that draw on disciplines and perspectives that are not directly involved with the information given within the text. Bonhoeffer notes, "The text is not interested in psychological explanations for the faithful decisions of a person. Why not? Because there is only one good reason for the proximity of call and deed: Jesus Christ himself."<sup>4</sup>

Jesus called Matthew. We do not know why. But it seems that Matthew was *not* called to be a disciple because of what he *knew* about Jesus. His was not an act of intellectually driven choice, personal preference, or well-researched decision making. The actions of Matthew were simply manifestations of obedience and trust: *Jesus called, Matthew followed*. There was clearly something about Jesus that drew people to him, but that "something" is not simply defined by words and their intellectual knowledge of him. Indeed, as the apostle James points out, knowing things about God is not necessarily indicative of knowing God: "You believe that God is one. Good for you! Even the demons believe that—and shudder" (Jas 2:19). Knowing God is not just about knowing things about God: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (Jas 1:27).

It would seem that knowledge of God is much more complex and considerably more embodied than it might at first appear to be. If this is so, then theology (knowledge of God) has less to do with knowing things about God and more about life with God.

### *Knowledge of God*

In teasing out this suggestion we might begin by noting that theology and the Christian life are first and foremost about love: 1 John 4:16: "And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them." Love is not a concept, an idea or the product or outcome of an intellectual argument. Love is experiential, embodied, relational. It is not

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3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Augsburg: Fortress, 2003), 57.

4. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, p. 57.

something we can grasp alone with our minds. Love is as much a *social* practice as it is an intellectual one. There is a little verse in Jeremiah 22:16 that can help us see the importance of this observation for current purposes. In this passage the prophet is talking about King Josiah who he says is a good King. He is a good king because “He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. *Is that not what it means to know me?* declares the LORD.”<sup>5</sup>

Walter Brueggemann picks up on this and, in like manner to the passage from James cited above, points out that knowing God is not simply an intellectual act, rather it is also a social process. The act of caring for the poor and the widow *is* knowledge of God. It is not that we come to know God *and then* look after the widows and the orphans. Such social practices are not the consequence of knowing God. Acting in such ways is a mode of knowing God. Love and knowledge of God are something we practice with our bodies and not simply with our minds. The answer to the difficult question “What does it mean to know and to love God when you don’t know God on the basis of language and intellect?” begins to emerge when we think in these ways. We come to know God as we give and receive love. This is not an anti-intellectual position. The intellect remains important: “He answered, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’” (Luke 10:27).

We still value the importance of thought and knowledge, but now, these things finds their proper place as *aspects* of what it means to know God; helpful dimensions of the experience of the Body of Jesus as a whole. Within the body of Christ there are many deeply interlinked ways of knowing God. Some of us may know things about God; all of us know God in our bodies. There are many forms of knowledge of God. There are also many forms of vocation.

### *Vocation and Providence*

The first thing to note with regard to vocation is that it is never simply a matter of personal edification. The idea that vocation is one’s personal career plan is mistaken. Vocation is participation in something bigger than one’s self; it is a call from God to participate in the things of God. Vocation is perhaps best framed as an aspect of God’s providence. Here I want to draw on Scott Bader-Saye’s narrative perspective on providence. In opposition to ideas of providence that involve an image of God as a Divine chess player, Bader-Saye argues that providence is best viewed as: “a way of narrating our lives in light of God’s larger purpose rather than as a way of explaining every event as caused by God.”<sup>6</sup> “Providence is the way in which God places a hopeful story on the happenings of the world. Bader-Saye wants to redirect the idea of providence away from the idea that it means that God is in charge of every moment, every second, every action, toward a different

5. Italics added.

6. Scott Bader-Saye, *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 76.

narratively oriented understanding. This understanding sees providence as the way in which Christians come to: “name our conviction that our futures can be trusted to God’s care, even when we cannot believe that God is the direct cause of all that happens.”<sup>7</sup> Providence recognizes the mystery and difficulties with the way in which the world is, and responds by providing a narrative account of that world that we can trust. Providence thus provides a powerful story that ensures that in the midst of the fallenness, brokenness, suffering and confusion of God’s creation, the beauty of God’s hopeful story is not lost.

### *Providence, Narrative, and Vocation*

Within this narrative perspective on providence, vocation—our calling to be with Jesus and to participate in God’s work in the world—is perceived as the embodiment of our calling that serves to place us and the events of the world within a hopeful narrative that is bigger than ourselves. Within such a narrative context, vocation is an opening up of our hearts to the callings of the Spirit in order that we can properly locate our narratives, and in so doing be enabled to participate faithfully within God’s work in the world. Within this model of providence, *all* human beings have a vocation and a calling from God to participate. However, not everyone recognizes or chooses to respond to that calling. The task of the church is to help people to hear the call of Jesus and to fulfill the calling that is gifted to them. Vocation is thus seen to be *missiological* (helping people, Christians and non-Christians, to hear the call of Jesus and find their vocation before God), *ecclesiological* (helping the church to become a place where a multitude of vocations can find a home), and *liturgical* (drawing attention to the sacredness of the world and the ways in which we are called to worship God in the everydayness of life).

### *Vocation Is Not a Choice*

Vocation has to do with being called out of the world by Jesus and at precisely the same time being sent back into it with something to do and to be. Vocation is not based on human choice. Vocation is based on *God’s* choice and command. As such, it inevitably and irrevocably contains a deeply countercultural dynamic. A. J. Conyer suggests that confusion around the nature of vocation emerged with the Enlightenment’s emphasis on intellect and reason: “The specific way in which the enlightenment used reason was as a replacement for the idea of vocation. One could then make reasoned choices. The true locus of personal decisions was to be found in the individual who ‘thinks for himself,’ as Kant would put it, and who declines to depend upon the ‘guidance of another.’”<sup>8</sup>

Culturally, reason and the emphasis on choice, free will, and autonomy have replaced vocation. However, this is a mode of false consciousness. Theologically,

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7. *Ibid.*, 79.

8. A. J. Conyers, *The Listening Heart: Vocation and the Crisis of Modern Culture* (Waco: Baylor, 2007), 14.

to have a vocation is to receive something from outside of yourself, to have your life profoundly shaped and directed by forces beyond your own control and comprehension. Far from being simply a matter of personal choice, vocation very often contradicts the will of the person who is called (see for example, Moses, Abraham, and Paul).<sup>9</sup> To be reasonable is to be able to think clearly, make good choices about yourself, and run and plan your own life. Reason asks us to personalize our talent and use it for whatever we desire.<sup>10</sup> Vocation asks us to obey Jesus' command and use our talents in the way that the God desires. There is a world of difference between receiving a vocation and trying to figure out what you can do with the rest of your life.

### *Luther, Vocation, and the Priesthood of All Believers*

Vocations are diverse and often change over time. Martin Luther's perspective on vocation is helpful at this point. Luther was deeply disturbed by the way in which the church had distorted the idea of vocation. The general assumption at that time was that the only people who had a vocation were the ordained priesthood. Vocation was assumed to be elitist and exclusive. In response Luther developed a revised understanding of vocation within which the priesthood of all believers formed a central strand.<sup>11</sup> Within this understanding, the priesthood was not confined to the hierarchy of the ordained priesthood. Rather, Luther argued, vocation is something that relates to the calling of *all* of God's people.<sup>12</sup> Everyone is a priest. All of us share in a common priesthood that emerges from our initiation into the Christian community through baptism. God does not choose special people to stand before him in the place of others. Only Jesus stands before the Father and pleads our cause. Church congregations are thus seen to be communities of priests. To think otherwise is, according to Luther, like "ten brothers all king's sons and equal heirs, choosing one of themselves to rule the inheritance in the interests of all."<sup>13</sup>

Such a perspective does not mean that the role of the ordained has been replaced by the laity. People are still called to be ordained ministers and priests. The difference is that such a calling is not prioritized over other callings. The role of the minister or the priest remains a distinct vocation. However, so also are office workers, shoemakers, nurses, husbands and wives, parents, and shop assistants. All of these vocations come together to form a network of neighborly love within which God's providential work is carried out. Each vocation is intended as a locus

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9. Exod 3; Gen 12; Acts 9, respectively.

10. A. J. Conyers, "The Meaning of Vocation," in "Vocation," special issue, *Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics* (2004): 13.

11. Martin Luther, *The Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude: Preached and Explained* (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph, 1859).

12. Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1959), 1140.

13. Gary D. Badcock, *The Way of Life: A Theology of Christian Vocation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 35.



for the dissemination of God's providential and graceful love. The picture Luther offers is of a highly complex matrix of interacting human vocations, all focused on glorifying God and manifesting God's neighborly love toward the world.

It is important to be clear that this doctrine—the priesthood of all believers—*does not* mean that each member of the church is a free autonomous being who can interpret Scripture or practice church in whatever way he or she wants, free from mutual responsibility and apart from the general connection with the Body.<sup>14</sup> The key is that *vocation is participation, not personal fulfillment*. Each vocation is necessary for the upbuilding of the Body, but none of them is definitive of the Body.

### *The Multiplicity of Vocations*

Importantly, vocations are not single but multiple, with each of us having a variety of different vocations over time and circumstance. George Veith observes that

God is graciously at work, caring for the human race through the work of other human beings. Behind the care we have received from our parents, the education we received from our teachers, the benefits we receive from our spouse, our employers, and our government stands God himself, bestowing his blessings.<sup>15</sup>

This multiplicity of vocations gives one's individual and corporate life a sense of meaningful direction within which common purpose is carved out through a shared focus on the ongoing sanctifying work of God. *Vocation describes the full breadth of human life and incorporates the full range of humanness.*

### **The Vocation of the Intellectually Disabled**

This perspective on vocation, call, and knowing God helps us to see more clearly what Frances Young means when she talks about Arthur's prophetic vocation. Arthur's vocation does not take the shape of a carefully thought-out career plan. Nor does it involve hours of spiritual discernment, deep engagement with Scripture, or anxious listening for the voice of God. Rather his vocation is revealed in *presence*, both his and God's. In the afterword to Young's book, Andrew Teal speaks of the impact that Arthur has had on his life:

The engagement with Arthur's life and the "silent veneration of his heart" has been a powerful renewing and redirecting force in my life at many turns. He has, for all his obvious disabilities, invited me, no doubt among many others, into a life more true. He has been a conduit of God's vocation—and the characteristic hallmarks of God's

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14. Hauerwas offers some interesting arguments as to why it might not be a good idea for all of us to have free reign in interpreting Scripture: Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scriptures: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).

15. Gene Edward Veith, "The Doctrine of Vocation: How God Hides Himself in Human Work," *Modern Reformation* (May/June, 1999): 5–6.



presence are there: a still welcome, no desire to manipulate or possess, moments of truthful, joyful engagement; and his inhabiting of the moment beckons us—and will always prompt me—to move authentically into a quality of life that prioritises dignity and compassion.<sup>16</sup>

At least a part of Arthur's vocation is revealed in the beauty and simplicity of who he is. His unique presence in the world reveals to others aspects of the presence of God that are often invisible to those of us whose minds have been formed by a culture of speed, rush, reason, and individualism. For those of us who assume that we have to do things to help others notice our presence in the world, and who may also assume that we need to do certain things to make God present with us, Arthur's prophetic witness names the error.

### **The Presence of God with Mary**

When we begin to think of vocation in this way the world starts to open up in faithful and revelatory ways. In drawing this article to a close we will move from the general to the particular and spend a little time with Mary, a woman who lives with profound and complex intellectual disabilities with high support needs. The term "high support needs" signifies the experience of people who have a profound intellectual disability, which includes high support needs and communication difficulties that present major challenges to getting one's views and preferences heard and understood. Such ways of being in the world offer deep challenges to hyper-cognitive theologies that demand a certain level of intellectual ability and communicational skills for authentic participation within the life of the church. However, such lives, when looked at from the angle we have been reflecting on thus far, reveal promise that opens up new spaces for understanding the nature of vocation.

Mary is 22 years old. She has an intellectual disability. She also has a degree of cerebral palsy that means that the muscles in her arms and legs are quite constricted and limited in movement. She is small, delicate, fragile; totally dependent on others for everything. At times Mary becomes quite animated and distressed and sometimes she bites and lashes out. Of course, there is always a reason for her distress, but it is sometimes very difficult to work out what that reason is. Her distress raises important hermeneutical challenges for those around her. The ways in which we understand the actions of others is determined by the interpretations we put on their behavior. Human communication is always a matter of projection and interpretation. We constantly read one another's minds and act according to what we think is going on within the experience of the other. The danger is that such natural interpretative projection can go horribly wrong if we begin with false presuppositions about the person before us. If, for example, we interpret Mary's actions as "violent" and then proceed accordingly, say by medicating her, we risk treating her with great injustice. It is true that she bites and sometimes hits people,

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16. Young, *Arthur's Call*, 161.

but are her actions really violent? If violence means “marked by the use of usually harmful or destructive physical force,”<sup>17</sup> then clearly Mary is not being violent. Unless one has a particularly all-embracing view of original sin, it is difficult to see how someone with Mary’s experience could utilize intentionally harmful or destructive physical force. It is inevitable that we need to interpret her behavior. Interpretation is always an act of faith: being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we cannot see (Heb 11:1). It is *not* inevitable that we interpret it negatively.

Those close to Mary begin their relationship with Mary using a different hermeneutic: a hermeneutic of love based on a hermeneutic of faith. What does such a hermeneutic look like? Her carer describes an encounter that helps us to see both how best to be with Mary in her distress, but also provides us with an insight into the nature of her vocation:

Mary was pretty upset the other day. Sometimes she just sits and screams like I have heard no one scream before. She curls up in my arms and her face would contort into an expression of sheer agony. And that scream; I have never heard a scream like it. It sounds like she is carrying the screams of the world’s in her suffering. On this day she was just like that. We were on the bus. I was taking Mary home after a day at the day centre. I didn’t know what to do so I took her on my lap and I just held her. At first I tried to communicate with her. I tried to talk and fill the empty spaces. But eventually and gradually I began to realise that there was nothing to say. Mary and I entered into a deep silence within which we were somehow bound together. What held us together is a mystery but it was deep, unspoken, binding. Mary’s calmness indicated to me that she was experiencing the same or at least that she was experiencing something that was giving her peace. We were together. After a while she reached out to me and slowly pushed me away. It was as if she was saying that such closeness of encounter could not be permanent; could not be continued into the everydayness of our life together. I heard her gesture, but the memory of our encounter continues to transform me. As I discovered Mary’s beauty so I encountered the possibility of my own beauty.<sup>18</sup>

## Mary’s Vocation

Mary’s vocation, Like Arthur’s, was simply to be herself and in being herself she revealed fresh dimensions of the meaning of God’s presence and the centrality of loving, human presence for the flourishing of all people. In order for her to be

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17. Merriam-Webster Dictionary: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/violent>, accessed December 7, 2019.

18. This narrative emerged as part of a project that was carried out by the author a few years ago exploring the spiritual lives of people living with profound intellectual disabilities. Further findings from this project can be found in: John Swinton, Harriet Mowat, and Susannah Baines, “Whose story am I? Redefining Profound Intellectual Disability in the Kingdom of God,” *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 15 (2011): 5–19.

herself and to flourish, she needs others to see the world differently and to be in the world differently. Her cry of distress was a call to notice her and in noticing her to see things differently. Jesus comes to bring life in all of its fullness. Such abundant life for Mary reveals itself in her need to be cared for and to be understood. Mary's presence opens up new ways of thinking about what life in all of its fullness might mean. By inhabiting the world in a slightly different way, she points us towards a dimension of humanness that is easily overlooked: *the vocation to be cared for*.

We might think of it in this way. The Genesis account of creation contains two different creation stories. In the first account God gives Adam dominion over the world and commands him to hold down the world; to keep it in its place.<sup>19</sup> However, in the second account of creation we find a different dynamic. God tells Adam to *care* and to tend for the world.<sup>20</sup> A primal responsibility of human beings is *to care*. The command to care is thus seen to be built into the story of creation. If that is the case, then something interesting emerges. A natural corollary of the command to care is the need to be *cared for*. Caring and being cared for are thus seen to be part of the same creation dynamic. That being so, if your life involves the need to be cared for in all that you do, you do not lose your dignity, worth, value, or purpose. You simply realize and reveal an aspect of being human that easily becomes occluded by worldviews that prioritize intellect, autonomy, action, and independence. *To care is to be faithful; to be cared for is a fundamental aspect of what it means to be human. To be human is to be loved.* Mary's fragility and vulnerability, if we have eyes to see it, reveal a fundamental flaw in our societal values and open up the potential for manifestation of genuinely grace-full love. Prophetic witness is revealed in being rather than doing.

But there is one further thing that we might want to consider in terms of prophetic presence and the vocation of someone like Mary. God is love and Jesus is encountered in relationships. Relationships are the place where love occurs, something that is central to the meaning of the Trinity. As Mary's carer embraces her, so she mirrors the incarnation. In Jesus God comes to us and embraces us in friendship. The embodiedness of the incarnation helps us to remember that it is necessary to *feel* the gospel; to *experience* the love of God. It may be very difficult to work out what the origins of Mary's distress are. But it is possible to embrace that pain and to ease it through loving presence. We don't have to know the origins of suffering to be able to offer consolation.

## Conclusion

Vocation is not something we do alone; it is not simply the gratification of our own desires. Vocation is being and encounter. Like relationships, it occurs in the space between us. As such, it is a gift rather than an achievement. If the primary purpose of our vocations is to participate faithfully in the neighborly love of God, then we

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19. Gen 1.

20. Gen 2.

need to think through what that looks like; what it feels like. Spending time with people like Arthur and Mary, taking their lives seriously and striving as best as we can to understand and be present with them, is the beginning point for such transformative reflective practices.

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