Although you might expect me to begin this sermon with a scriptural reference, I begin by talking a little about Samuel Johnson’s short novel *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia*, (1759) a novel I have often taught to undergraduates here at Centre and earlier at Kenyon. It is all about the choice of life and begins in a sort of bubble paradise that is not unlike a stereotypical college campus. The princes and princesses of Abissinia lived in “the happy valley.”

*Here the sons and daughters of Abissinia lived only to know the soft vicissitudes of pleasure and repose, attended by all that were skilful to delight, and gratified with whatever the senses can enjoy. They wandered in gardens of fragrance, and slept in fortresses of security. Every art was practiced to make them pleased with their own condition. The sages who instructed them, told them of nothing but the miseries of publick life, and described all beyond the mountains as regions of calamity, where discord was always raging, and where man preyed upon man.*

Such a scene may not perfectly mirror life at Centre, but there must be a smile or two of wry recognition out there as you hear this narrative. And yet Rasselas, the Prince, was discontented.

*I can discover within me no power of perception which is not glutted with its proper pleasure, yet I do not feel myself delighted. Man has surely some latent sense for which this place affords no gratification, or he has some desires distinct from sense which must be satisfied before he can be happy.*

Ah yes, there is more to life than the pleasures of the happy valley can provide, and Rasselas seeks escape and then proper work. In short, he wants to graduate. And so do you. As the novel continues we see that he did indeed escape, in company with a tutor, Imlac, and his sister, the princess Nekayah. Brother and sister, they left the happy valley. Like Adam and Eve at the close of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* …

*The world was all before them, where to choose
Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide:
They hand in hand with wand’ring steps and slow,
Through Eden took thir solitary way.*

But – unlike Adam and Eve -- Rasselas, Nekayah, his sister and Imlac, their philosophical guide, explored the cruel world, meditated on their experiences, and all returned to their Eden, the happy valley, retreating from the world and all of its challenges. Samuel Johnson was content to explore matters of intentionality and misunderstanding in his philosophical novel, emphasizing the choices one makes, the errors that are common, the patience that is needed, and outcomes that one doesn’t expect but must live with. He did not point the way or recommend a particular choice of life. His protagonist, Rasselas, rambles somewhat aimlessly, musing.

By contrast, Dr. Johnson’s namesake, Samuel of the Hebrew Bible, as you have just heard, accepts the call he hears and works diligently for the Lord under tough circumstances. *The Book of Samuel* is full of the smiting of Israel, the iniquity of leaders, but eventually the anointing of David and the slaying of Goliath. Samuel’s life was one of service without expectation of short-term reward or justification. Unlike Rasselas, Samuel did not wander aimlessly around the
fleshpots of the Middle East, expressing curiosity at what he saw; Samuel worked, spoke, prophesied, and did his best to heal a nation.

The Book of Samuel and Rasselas are tales of the ancient Holy Land, of Abissinia and Palestine, the land to which my grandparents and many of their family went to serve in various missionary capacities. That part of the world is still a place that calls for help, healing and blessing, that demands our attention but which tempts us to close our eyes and ears and not hear the call. Israelites and Philistines are still smiting the heck out of one another, and there seems to be no Samuel to call upon the Lord for forgiveness, healing and reconciliation on behalf of its beleaguered people. The photo on the wall of my grandfather, Edwin St. John Ward, in his Red Cross officer's uniform still awes me; it tells me that he was willing to hear and answer a dangerous call taking him far from home. The picture of my diminutive grandmother, Charlotte Allen Ward, on her Arabian stallion, packed up and ready to follow Dr. Ward to the next desert clinic fearlessly is even more impressive.

My grandparents and my own parents (who heard the call to go out to China in 1946, only to be sent home by the Communists in 1949) were not alone, and there are countless contemporary examples in the news every day.

So I personally feel challenged by my family tradition, my liberal education, as well as current events to listen carefully: who is calling and can/should I heed that call? My great-grandfather's, grandfather's, father's and my own alma mater, Amherst College, enrolled boys from western New England with the express purpose of sending them out to enlighten the world with a Congregational gospel. I was the 25th member of my family to graduate from Amherst and almost all of them turned out to be missionary doctors (like my grandfather Edwin), teachers (like my father Paul), or social workers in the YMCA (like my twin great-uncles Mark and Earl). Their call was to distant lands – whereas my own, rather more mundane, may have been to work closer to home and to come, happily, to Kentucky, the ancestral home of my mother's family, to try to be a good dean.

And that's where the class of 2006 comes in... In not-so-olden days, the president of Centre College taught all of the seniors graduating a course in ethics, equipping them to go out into the world morally upright and, probably, to serve the Presbyterian Church or some other kind of church or what we now call an NGO. Terras Irradiant was Amherst's motto (May they enlighten the lands) and is much like Centre’s motto: Doctrina Lux Mentis. (A Google search suggests that this motto belongs to Chaminade University in Honolulu – a closer look at the data base tells us that it is Centre's own). In fact, hundreds of small colleges were founded in the nineteenth century to teach young men and, soon, young women as well, to be faithful servants of their own peculiar Christian denomination. It is very much to the credit of Centre’s founders, that from the start the college expressly embraced and included students from many faith traditions – we were not then or now narrow, parochial or exclusive.

Back to The Book of Samuel. Now Eli, you will remember, was a priest of the Lord of Israel, but his sons did not know the Lord; they served Belial – they were scoundrels like the vandals who knocked down the lamppost in front of Old Centre last Thursday night or those who stole the iron Old Centre sign that hangs on Walnut Street. Samuel the boy didn’t understand the source of the call he heard the first, second or third time; his professor had to help him. And when Samuel delivered God's angry message to Eli, Eli accepted God’s message as transmitted by Samuel and heard a stern reminder of the shortcoming of the priestly class and the tribes of Israel led by those priests. And so Eli supported and mentored the young Samuel, raising a prophet. Are today’s professors, rabbis, priests, mentors and mullahs giving their charges the right advice, helping them heed the call? And what are we doing to direct the sons of Eli into the paths of righteousness?

If there is a prophet-to-be graduating today from Centre, she or he might recall an inspirational message from an admired teacher, or might remember a moment of decision and indecision which was resolved thanks to a tutor, advisor, or classmate. Classroom learning, as well as conversations outside of class, in dorms or on the fields of play, all conspire to prepare the
graduate to serve a world in need of a prophet’s insight. Centre does not coerce its students to follow a particular belief system, but we do require that all students study Religion and how religions inform and guide behavior. Is that indoctrination?

Indoctrination. In common parlance nowadays this is a dirty word. And yet for centuries it simply denoted the amalgam of teaching and learning. The OED gracefully lists as its first meaning “to imbue with learning, to teach.” For almost 150 years Centre College, I think, believed in indoctrination, and did what it could to indoctrinate. Doctrina Lux Mentis (learning is the light of the mind) was an inspiration for our founders and scores of presidents, deans, and professors here in Danville. For many of them the doctrina was the gospel, not disembodied and abstract truth, but the Christian Bible. And still we indoctrinate today -- but not in the denominational sense of wanting every student to be a good Presbyterian or even expecting that all of our students should live by some specific creed or a higher standard. At Centre we have not figured out the sole path to a righteous and charitable life; we try to illuminate several, many, hundreds. But indoctrinate we do.

Our task is to illuminate for our students where their skills lie and to sharpen their senses so that they can choose the line of work that they can best serve and so that they can hear the sometimes subtle, quiet message of vocation that will take them onward as they strive to serve others. Centre hires dedicated teachers from among those who apply for jobs and set them the task: to help students learn how to live according to the dictates of their own hearts and using their best abilities. So, if we indoctrinate, we do so not to shove ideologies down unwilling throats, but rather to enable students to read the world more subtly, accurately, sympathetically.

And once our graduates can read the world a little better, they you are obliged to make the world better. Of course, early and late, you will be concerned about getting food on the table, paying off student loans, meeting the car or mortgage payments, and so forth. Getting started in the world of work, post college, is a challenging business. But if you allow yourselves to concentrate on yourselves, you will live a very constrained and shallow life, more like a Rasselas than like a Samuel. I am particularly irritated by an advertisement on TV by a HughesNet spokeswoman, who reassures us that the expense for such a service is more than OK: “And you deserve it,” she chirps, referring to an apparently inalienable right to high speed access to the Internet. We don’t deserve comfortable accommodations or easily accessed entertainment, or an income that would place us in the top 10% of wealthy Americans. We are not owed the means to make us happy; rather, because we are fortunate we know that our gifts and hard work will enable and obligate us to help others.

Hard as it will be in the early stages of your lives, being active, purposeful, and generous in your assistance to others is its own reward and pays big dividends, if I can continue the financial lingo. The habit of charitable giving is just that: it must be practiced on a small scale before it can become routine. And, whether you feel so fortunate today or not, you are blessed, beloved, and rich in gift-giving potential. When the CEO of major American corporation says that he has lived the American dream because he has accumulated and spent enough money to support thousands of his workers, we know that his dream is a nightmare. Although you may dream of wealth, you surely know that extravagant and conspicuous consumption is a sign of spiritual poverty.

So, you may hear a call in the form of a request for help in your community – and you may wonder whether it is THE CALL. It may be a call to help with an after-work program of educational support for at-risk youngsters. It might be meals-on-wheels, the scouts, or a meditation group. Any of all of these may be calls to a more spiritual, a less selfish life. Recall Charles Dickens’ satiric portrait of false philanthropy in the person of Mrs. Jellyby in Bleak House, whose concern for the natives in Borioboola-Gha on the left bank of the Niger River in Africa completely eclipsed her sense of duty and service to her own starving family. One does not have to go far afield to answer God’s call. One just has to hear and answer and take action.
That’s where the simple message of James comes in. Faith and works, work and faith. How to
draw the lines between and around these terms has been the battlefield of Protestant vs.
Catholic, and among Protestant denominations for centuries. James said it clearly in today’s
epistle. What you do matters. If, for instance, you say you are a faithful church-going Christian,
then you must act that way -- giving all you can spare and then double that to help those in need.
The brave example of all kinds of Americans responding individually and collectively, with or
without a faith affiliation, to the needs of the Gulf coast in this last year reminds us all that works
matter. And the philanthropic records show that contrary to expectation there was no discernible
“donor fatigue” after Katrina – Americans continue to pour out their gifts to those less fortunate,
even after the extraordinary burst of generosity following the hurricane’s devastation. Following
their example, you might do a periodic check on your own practice: when the cost of your country
club membership or your season ticket exceeds your gift to your favorite charity, the Red Cross,
the Salvation Army, your church, synagogue, mosque or even Centre College, then you should
review your priorities.

So I address the graduating seniors with the message you knew was on the way – partly because
you are good at reading your professors’ minds (we are often quite transparent) and partly
because the readings take us there. What will your work be? Will you hear the call? Is it truly a
call from God, or is the call a temptation to stray? Is a job offer a CALL or is that simply a choice
of where and how to earn a living? Rasselas and his little band of traveling philosophers
considered all manner of schemes and then retreated back to the happy valley, the safe life of the
campus bubble. Samuel and so many like him in the real world stepped out into the apparent
chaos of an apparently godforsaken world and showed that God is there, calling on us to love one
another. And many of you have been gearing up for this quite intentionally in your Centre years,
volunteering to help in this community and at home, being active and steady participants in your
own faith traditions, intervening to help a good friend in crisis or a virtual stranger in danger.

I must confess that as a graduating senior from college I did not clearly hear a call of the sort I
speak of today. I just bumbled along – providentially meeting Maryanne Cavanagh in our first
graduate class at UVA in 1966. And together we have worked to take life seriously and to
develop a habit of looking out for others as much as for ourselves. In fact, my wife and I will be
commencing with those of you in the class of 2006 forty years after our own commencement
exercises, leaving Centre College for a future still somewhat unknown. We know that we have
been blessed here and that we have an obligation to try to make a useful contribution to the world
to which we go. I am not exactly sure what my call will be in that new environment. I hope I don’t
miss it. I hope that the noise of the world doesn’t drown it out.

Before she sketched out the future of the characters whom readers of that long novel have come
to know quite well, George Eliot began the last chapter of *Middlemarch* this way:

*Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending. Who can quit young lives after being long in
company with them, and not desire to know what befell them in their after-years? For a fragment
of a life, however typical, is not the sample of an even web: promises may not be kept, and an
ardent outset may be followed by declension; latent powers may find their long-waited
opportunity; a past error may urge a grand retrieval.*

We all wonder what the class of 2006 will be like years from now; we know that you will make
brave beginnings and encounter stiff challenges. You will fall, and rise again, you will make
mistakes and correct them, just as you have here. The portion of your lives spent in these four
years at Centre is about a fifth of your span of years on the planet. Our years here (Maryanne’s
and mine), sixteen in all, comprise over a quarter of our lives. Centre has shaped us all,
profoundly, and our ups and downs here may be some kind of indication of what is to follow.
Centre has given us skills and talents we didn’t have when we arrived. A true liberal arts
education helps us understand and respond to a subtle call and accept a job for which we were
not explicitly trained. Or we may be called just to dive in and do the obvious task with some
gratitude for its obviousness. Centre’s best traditions, old and new, challenge us to be good
servants as we go forward from this place, to hear the call when it comes and to know how to answer "Speak; for thy servant heareth," as Samuel did.

AMEN