

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

All three of our readings this morning are call stories in one way or another. Each of them relate a human being, or a group of human beings, being called into God's service – the prophet Isaiah in our first reading, the apostle Paul in our second reading, and the disciples in our Gospel reading. We don't get Paul's actual call story here, rather an important clarification about the *nature* of his call. But we do know his call story from the book of Acts, and so we can say that all three call stories, those of Isaiah, Paul, and the disciples, take place under extraordinary circumstances. Isaiah and Paul have visions. The disciples have this miraculous catch of fish. The calls of Isaiah and Paul are individual call stories. The disciples' story is more collective. They are called as a group. And so there is room to apply these various stories to our own vocations this morning, our own callings, both as individuals, and as a community of faith, a group of modern-day disciples.

If you are like me, then you do not have a miraculous call story. You were baptized as an infant and brought up by your parents and grandparents in the Christian faith. Your call story is not one you remember. Your parents brought you to be baptized before you what was going on. You didn't have a chance to say, as Isaiah did, "send me!" And for those reasons you might have been led to think that your call as a Christian is lacking in some way. And there's a whole segment of Christianity that would agree with you, those who think that infant baptism is not real baptism because they think of baptism as something you do for God, rather than as something that God does for you. On the other hand, if you came to faith later in life, you might doubt your own call for the exact opposite reasons – you don't have a family history in the church that goes back generations. You have not had the support of parents and grandparents in your life of faith. You don't know all of the jargon that everybody else seems to know. (What the heck is a narthex, anyway?)

Whether your story is like mine, or whether you came to faith later in life, I think that all three of our readings this morning help to clarify just what it means to be called into God's service, and reassure us that God doesn't make second-class calls. Each of our readings highlights an important point in this regard.

First, it's not our worthiness that matters, is the message we bear, which isn't our message. In our second reading Paul talks about his own call. He was not one of the original disciples who had been with Jesus throughout his earthly ministry. He was not an eyewitness of Jesus' crucifixion or resurrection. He had actually been an *enemy* of the early church, a persecutor of the first Christians. Because of that, his credentials as an apostle of Jesus were challenged again and again. There are traces of this in a number of his letters, and our second reading this morning is a case in point. He is owning his past here. He had indeed been an enemy of the gospel he now proclaims. He is indeed a latecomer to the faith compared with many. But his message is the same as that of the original disciples because it is not his message after all, but Jesus'. He is only passing on what he received, from the other disciples and from Jesus himself, who appeared to him in a vision. Paul knows that he is not worthy to be an apostle. But he is who he is. His past is his past. He can't change that. And God chose not to destroy him when he was God's enemy, but to make him into a friend, a case study in God's amazing grace.

Second, it is God and not us who will determine the effectiveness of our calling. It's our Gospel reading that makes this point. Jesus uses the boat of some fishermen as a kind of stage to teach a big group of people who are crowding in on him. It is often said of this passage that a body of water can amplify the human voice when the water is still, as it often is in the morning. This was a kind of natural, makeshift auditorium. So that happens, but then there is this strange story of Jesus suggesting that the fishermen go back out again to catch some fish. They are pros. They do this for a

living. They know that the best time to fish is at night or early morning. They were out all night and caught nothing. It was a bad day at work. And bad days at work are much worse for people like fishermen who get paid only for what they produce than they are for salaried people like me or many of you. If they don't catch fish on a given day, they don't get paid that day. So Jesus, the adopted son of a day laborer from an inland hill town, tells these professional fisherman to go back out to try to catch some fish. And so they do, and that's maybe the most remarkable thing about his story, that they listened to Jesus in the first place instead of just laughing at him. But they do what he suggests, and they haul in an amazing catch. Then comes the invitation to come with him and "catch people," which is a strange metaphor to our ears for proclaiming gospel. But Jesus here is playing off an ancient image of fish in the sea representing all the people all the people of the earth. The emphasis here is not the catching, but the extent of the gospel's reach. The message of this incident for the disciples, and for us, is that if Jesus can deliver such results in the face of their best professional judgement, maybe he will deliver analogous results when it comes to proclaiming the gospel and spreading the faith.

Third, the gospel we are called to proclaim may not be the kind of good news that we or others think we want or need. Our reading from Isaiah is this wonderful call story that I talked about in the children's sermon and that has made its way into our liturgy. But the message that Isaiah proclaims is not the kind of comforting good news we're used to associating with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The message is not that everything will be okay. Everything will not be okay for the people Isaiah is called to speak to. They are headed for destruction because they will not turn from their destructive ways, from their idolatry and their injustice. Yet there is good news nevertheless in Isaiah's message, hidden right at the end. "The holy seed is the stump." The tree of the kingdom of Judah will come down. But God will not let that be the end of their story.

I want to apply these three points that I've just taken us through to our own lives of faith, individually and collectively, but in reverse order. First, the great good news of Jesus Christ that we bear is not some simple, amorphous message of God's grace and approval no matter what. It is not a message of "peace, peace" where there is no peace, as the prophet Jeremiah complained. It is a message of crucifixion and resurrection, of sin and forgiveness, of darkness and light, of death and life. It is a message that enables us to face the worst about ourselves and the world we are part of confident that God is merciful and forgiving for Jesus' sake, and will be with us through whatever pain and difficulty we may face.

Second, it is God and not us who will determine the effectiveness of our calling. I have recently heard more than one story about pastors at the end of their careers who decided that their years as a pastor had been pointless, that they didn't have any noticeable effect on the people they were called to serve. Maybe there are similar stories about laypeople who have labored faithfully in the church all their lives. I expect there are. I want to say that that is not our call to make. If by the grace of God we are persistent and faithful in proclaiming and stewarding the message of gospel, it will be God alone who determines the effectiveness of our proclamation. Our task, as I said last week, is to focus on proclaiming that message in word and deed. The rest is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Third, there are no second-class calls in Christ's church. Each of us has been called in Holy Baptism to service in the Kingdom of God that is coming to pass even now. The task of the proclaiming the gospel is ours together as the church, young and old, lay and clergy, lifelong Christians and newcomers alike.

So rejoice in your calling, sisters and brothers in Christ. Rejoice in your calling and take heart in the gospel promise you are called to embody and proclaim. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.