

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

The Apostle Paul writes that after the Resurrected Jesus appeared to the disciples and to hundreds of other faithful followers, he manifested himself to Paul himself. Paul says he was the 'least' of those who were blessed with this manifestation. You may remember that this manifestation, this revelation, this epiphany came as some sort of visual and audible vision along the road to Damascus, as Paul was on his way to root out those illegal Christians in that city. He was zealously on fire to persecute and eradicate this new religion. But that encounter changed him, changed his mind, and changed his direction 180 degrees. He understood that encounter to be a 'calling', a calling from the grace of Christ to get on the right track and use his energy in the service of God's dream.

A few hundred years earlier, the Bible tells us, Isaiah was minding his own business being a man of unclean lips, as he puts it, living among a whole people of unclean lips, when he had a vision and an encounter that turned his life around, too. It was a weird vision, with a sound of voices that shook everything up. And then, ceremoniously, he was forgiven and purified by having a hot coal placed in his mouth. Ouch! And then, forgiven and empowered, he volunteered for God's service as a prophet, as one who will carry the news of God's benevolent dream to his people. And, BTW, these are not the only stories of 'callings' in the Bible. There are many, many others. In fact, we might think of the Bible as an anthology of stories about men and women who are being called to do work on God's behalf, and most of them are reluctant to do it. When Moses encounters the burning bush in the wilderness, God speaks to him and shares the plan for him to go to Egypt and secure the release of the Hebrew slaves. Moses says: Wait, no! I am a poor speaker. No one will believe me, or listen to me, or do what I say. Certainly there must be a better choice for you to make, God!

Think of Jonah, who keeps avoiding God's wish that he go to Nineveh and preach repentance in that foreign and loathsome city. He tries to escape God's calling by sea, and only winds up in the belly of a great fish which returns him to his appointed task by spitting him up on shore. Or think of the Prophet Jeremiah in our Old Testament reading last week, who when hearing God's call insists that he is but a boy, unworthy of the trust that God would like to put in him and incapable of the task God is asking of him. But God is persistent. The Father knows best. God's love for the people has need of Jeremiah, and it will require the prophet's full attention even if he doesn't feel up to it. And God's grace (Jesus by name) apparently has need of Simon Peter the fisherman, too, and their encounter is nearly as bizarre as any in scripture. A bad catch overnight? Try again, and don't give me an argument! But, Master, we have worked all night for nothing. We're tired and hungry and disappointed and just want to go home. I'm just not able to be successful today. I'm a loser. But, okay, if you want me to try one more time, I guess I'll do what you say, if even just to prove you wrong. Well, as we hear in our reading from Luke's Gospel today, it was Jesus who proved Peter wrong.

There's a story I've told you before, but I like to tell it, if only to remind myself how I came to be here with you. When I was a teenager, I thought I heard God calling me to become a minister and pastor, to take on the responsibility of gathering people together and declaring God's love for everyone. In my youthful enthusiasm, I said: I can do that! But as I grew a little older, I had my doubts. I said: wait! I can't do that. No one will listen to me, of all people! So, for decades I insisted to God that I didn't have what it takes...not enough skill, not enough faithfulness, certainly not enough credibility! But then I had my own encounter with God's grace (Jesus by name), and, still hearing God's eternal call, I thought I might take the plunge, and began the process by which one is endorsed by the church for professional ministry. And so, after filling out forms and meeting with discernment groups and the Commission on Ministry, I was called to an interview with the bishop. But on that day, I was again filled with doubt, and I said to Bishop Skip: Bishop, I fear I can't really do this. The work is so important, that I just don't feel worthy of it. And he responded: Well, duh, Nick, of

course you're not worthy...did you just figure that out?! (Not exactly what you want to hear from your bishop!) But then he went on to say: Listen, I'm your bishop, and I, too, am unworthy. We are all unworthy in principle. But don't worry, God makes us worthy of the tasks God wants us to do. Some years later, I was endorsed and ordained by him, and you all hired me to serve God's dream in this lovely place. Thank you.

The Eucharistic Prayer we have been using this Epiphany season declares that God has blessed us with "memory, reason, and skill". Do you suppose God has also blessed each of us with the ability to hear ourselves being called to various activities? And would it be too much of a stretch of imagination to think that God has given us that ability in order that we can be active in the advancement of God's dream for all of creation? Have you heard such callings? Have you felt such nudges? Have you noticed such inspirations? Have they influenced how you have lived your family life? Have they guided your work life? Have God's callings helped shape your plans, your dreams, even your hobbies? What are the callings you have heard in your life so far? And how might we discern whether they are really callings from God? Well, here's a suggestion: Is love behind those callings? Did you somehow, maybe without even recognizing it, have an encounter with God's grace (Jesus by name)? Was it grace which guided Gloria and Leanne and Gale and Val and Leslie to careers and ministry in teaching? Was it grace which guided Peter and Susan to adopt their three children? Has it been grace which has empowered our ushers and lectors and acolytes? Was it grace which gave Peter the idea to clear the snow from our sidewalk yesterday?

Think about the many ways in which grace has prompted you, how it has sought to lead you to good decisions and reactions. Consider all the ways it has called you to do the faithful thing, and has empowered you to do wonderful things. Please don't be too humble, thinking somehow that you weren't worthy enough. Please don't dwell on your regrets either, thinking that you somehow missed great opportunities. And, please, don't try to make too much sense out of it all, or over-analyze as if you were trying to solve a puzzle. Let the callings speak for themselves, mysterious as they might seem. Let them be holy mysteries, gifts from God. Jesus tells Simon Peter to throw the nets one more time, and this time to throw them into the deep water. Forget the familiar shallow water close to shore, take your boat into the deep water, which is a Biblical image of chaos, of darkness, of unlikely prospects. And go out there with hope, with trust, with faith, even with love, for there is an ironic need in the deep water. There is life there, oddly, life which your nets and your effort can pull up and out, people there in the chaotic darkness who can be brought into the light. An abundance of them, enough to strain your imagination and your nets.

So, I have a challenge for you: Now, I'm not Jesus, though I like to think that together we are striving with some success to be his Body in our place and time. No, I'm not Jesus, and I don't know just how much grace anyone hears in my voice (and I'm not going to place a hot coal on my lips to find out), but as your endorsed coach, I have this challenge for you: Cast your nets for Christ, and try to catch some people. If this congregation is indeed a place where grace is experienced, a place where holiness is manifested, a place which warms the heart and inspires the soul, then it is a place to which we should invite our neighbors, especially those out there in the deep water. I challenge you to invite a person, a friend perhaps, or a family member, or a work colleague to come and see and hear what we're up to. It might just be a calling for you, one for which God may make you worthy, like Isaiah, and Paul, and Jeremiah, and Moses, and Ruth, and Jonah, and Simon Peter. And perhaps those whom you invite may also marvel at the many and diverse callings they, too, are hearing, to spread the good news of grace and the blossoming of God's dream. I challenge you to boldly take the hand of someone you know and lead them to the knowledge and love of God, and of God's Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.