

## *Called to Success?*

Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-11; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

We come from many different places, have differing personalities, and vary in age. Yet even in our differences, one thing unites us: we are here this morning, you and I, because we have been called. In one way or another, God's hand was laid upon us.

There is a sense in which, if we are here, we have been put here. Your being here in church, worshipping Jesus, trying to follow Jesus as a disciple, was God's idea before it was yours. Through baptism, we have been called, commissioned to be Jesus's people in the world. That means that, through baptism, we are called to witness, in word and deed, to what has happened to the world in Jesus Christ. In this Christian season of Epiphany, we remind ourselves that, even as Jesus is the light of the world, we are called to be his lights in the world.

And how appropriate that our first lesson this Sunday is from the prophet Isaiah, the prophet that Jesus quotes more than any other. It's appropriate because it can be said of each of us, just as the prophet Isaiah said of himself, "The Lord called me . . . called my name . . . saying to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I show my glory'" (Isa 49:1-2 CEB).

We're here because we've been called.

Sometimes people speak of Christian "salvation." The word *salvation* in the New Testament means healing, rescue, saving. It also means being *called*, given a job to do. That's why in many churches (as we do here), when they baptize someone, they give them a candle, telling them (just as Jesus said) to "let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven" (Matt 5:16 CEB).

That's important. A recent book for preachers advised that we should begin every sermon

asking, on behalf of the congregation, “What need do you have that God can meet?” Start with people’s problems, needs, and desires, the book advises. Then craft the sermon so that these needs are met, these questions answered, and these problems addressed.

Trouble is, that’s not the way of the Christian faith. The gospel isn’t a story about how Jesus came to meet your needs, but rather a story about how Jesus enlists you to work with him and on his behalf in meeting the needs of the world!

Look at today’s Gospel. The story of Jesus begins with the calling of ordinary people to be his disciples. Whatever work Jesus wants to do, he doesn’t do that work alone. He calls others to help him—people just like you and me.

And a major reason why we gather regularly to worship Jesus—to learn from him, sing songs for him, and see his way more clearly—is so that we might be better equipped to serve him.

Which brings me back to the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah had a clear sense of his call by God:

*The Lord called me before my birth, called my name when I was in my mother’s womb.*

And Isaiah is clear about the gifts that God has given him and the work that God wants him to do: *He made my mouth like a sharp sword. . . . He made me a sharpened arrow . . . saying to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I show my glory.”*

Isaiah is given the mouth to speak up for God, to preach and proclaim the message of God.

Through this man’s mouth, God will show forth to the world God’s glory.

And please don’t say that this is just a text for preachers!

One thing I love about many of you is the way you, wherever you serve, speak up for God.

Martin Luther said that a preacher (like me) preaches in the church on Sunday so that the people of God (like you) can preach in the world the rest of the week.

Your mouth becomes “like a sharp sword” as you speak up when some injustice occurs at your school, in your office, or in the community. You become a “sharpened arrow” that goes directly to change someone’s heart, to speak some word of comfort in a tough situation, to offer encouragement amid someone’s sadness. In so doing, God could say of you as God said to Isaiah, “you are my servant . . . in whom I show my glory.” Let your light shine!

And maybe it’s because I’m a minister, but the main thing that caught my attention in this week’s word from Isaiah is this:

*But I said, “I have wearied myself in vain. I have used up my strength for nothing.”*

Say what? Right after Isaiah’s stirring words about his call from God the prophet speaks these words of disillusionment and despair: “*But,*” I said, “*I have worked myself to death for nothing. I have worn myself out in vain.*”

If I were the prophet, talking about my call from God, celebrating the gifts that God had given me, the assignment that had been laid on me by God, I don’t think I would have said that. How can it be that the one who is called by God, gifted by God, commissioned to do God’s work, should also be able to feel that it was all for nothing? That the deeds that were done in God’s name were deeds done in vain?

How? I bet that some of you here know firsthand how that feels. You have been baptized. That makes you a disciple of Christ. From time to time you have attempted to help somebody, to speak up on someone’s behalf, or to pray for someone’s healing only to find that your words, your work was “in vain,” “for nothing.”

I know someone whose God-assigned ministry is to pray for people in need. Each day, she spends nearly an hour in intense, heartfelt, earnest prayer. She has the names of the people in front

of her. If possible, she has a photograph of them.

When complimented on her prayer ministry, and asked what her greatest challenge in praying was,

She answered, “Despair.” She said that most of her prayers go unfulfilled, unanswered.

A church member, through the good services of Alcoholics Anonymous, began that arduous climb out of the depths of addiction. As you may know, one of the twelve steps is to apologize to and ask forgiveness from those you have wronged. He wrote letters to four different people that he had, in the course of his illness, mistreated.

When he was praised by his minister for this courageous act he said, “Sadly, I only heard back from two of them. Those who responded both said, ‘Never speak to me again. I don’t forgive you.’” Then he said, “Unfortunately, a major excuse for alcoholics is failure.”

A man has spent three decades as a pastoral counsellor, attempting to help people with their problems. His ministry is sponsored by a church. He has his office there. When asked what he had learned in all those years of counselling people, he responded, “I have learned that we almost never, hardly, ever truly help anybody. I’m retiring next month.”

In fact, from what I’ve seen in the church, I would say don’t ever respond to God’s call (as did the young Isaiah) with “Here am I, send me,” if you don’t know what to do with failure.

The higher the call, the more noble the work you are commissioned to do, the greater the opportunity for failure. Remember where Jesus’s loving, caring ministry took him.

In fact, I might say that one way you know it’s a calling from God, a vocation that has been laid upon you by Jesus, is if there’s failure, at some point a sense that it’s all been in vain, that you have done your best but have nothing to show for it.

And yet despair and failure are not where our scripture ends. Though the prophet is honest

about his sense of disappointment, he proclaims:

*Nevertheless . . . my reward is with my God. . . . Moreover, I'm honoured in the Lord's eyes; my God has become my strength.*

Our call, our baptism and enlistment to do Christ's work, was his idea before it was ours. Any reward or honour comes from God, not from the visible, positive results of what we have accomplished. It's up to us to do our best, to be faithful to the guidance that we are given by God; it's up to God to grant the fruit, the reward, the honour and glory.

A wise man who had spent his life teaching teachers said "Good teachers have got to be in love with planting the seed; they don't need to be there for the harvest."

Sometimes when we think we have failed, God takes our failures and weaves them into God's good purposes in spite of us. We play our bit parts in the great drama of God's redemption of the world, only to be surprised that God has worked out larger purposes through us than we could have imagined.

In interviewing candidates for ordination, the interview board asks an important question: what has been your most recent failure in the church?

The candidate's response to that question is revealing. No failures? No initiative, no risk taken, no great work attempted, and therefore little accomplished. Failures? A sign of initiative, creativity, a sure sign of *faith*.

Will Willimon tells the story: "The way I remember it, his was the best Sunday School class I ever had. His class, when I was fourteen, was the best part of growing up in the church. He treated us like adults, talked to us about problems in his business, and shared the challenges of being a husband and father. I remember loving his class, looking forward to his lessons every Sunday.

So when I happened to see him at a gathering a few years ago, I went up to him and gratefully mentioned my memories of his being my Sunday school teacher.

“Yeah,” he said, “I remember that class, too. Worst year of my life. I didn’t want to teach it; told the pastor I didn’t know enough about the Bible, wasn’t that good with kids. You kids didn’t listen and didn’t seem to care. I remember lots of behaviour problems. After two years of trying, I quit, telling the pastor, ‘Don’t ask me again.’ The whole thing was a failure as far as I was concerned.”

Wow. That class is a major reason why I became a pastor. Sometimes, in the gracious working of God, our actions are not the only actions, and our failures are not our failures.”

Thus, the despairing, failed prophet hears God say,

*Kings will see and stand up; commanders will bow down on account of the Lord, who is faithful, the holy one of Israel, who has chosen . . .you.* Thanks be to God. Amen