

Chosen Anyway

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
February 2, 2020

- Judges 6:11-16a (Good News Translation) ¹¹ Then the LORD's angel came to the village of Ophrah and sat under the oak tree that belonged to Joash, a man of the clan of Abiezer. His son Gideon was threshing some wheat secretly in a wine press, so that the Midianites would not see him. ¹² The LORD's angel appeared to him there and said, "The LORD is with you, brave and mighty man!" ¹³ Gideon said to him, "If I may ask, sir, why has all this happened to us if the LORD is with us? What happened to all the wonderful things that our fathers told us the LORD used to do – how he brought them out of Egypt? The LORD has abandoned us and left us to the mercy of the Midianites." ¹⁴ Then the LORD ordered him, "Go with all your great strength and rescue Israel from the Midianites. I myself am sending you." ¹⁵ Gideon replied, "But Lord, how can I rescue Israel? My clan is the weakest in the tribe of Manasseh, and I am the least important member of my family." ¹⁶ The LORD answered, "You can do it because I will help you...."
- Matthew 4:18-22 (Good News Translation) ¹⁸ As Jesus walked along the shore of Lake Galilee, he saw two brothers who were fishermen, Simon (called Peter) and his brother Andrew, catching fish in the lake with a net. ¹⁹ Jesus said to them, "Come with me, and I will teach you to catch people." ²⁰ At once they left their nets and went with him. ²¹ He went on and saw two other brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee. They were in their boat with their father Zebedee, getting their nets ready. Jesus called them, ²² and at once they left the boat and their father, and went with him.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: God makes us what God needs us to be to serve the way of Jesus in our world.

It's possible that someone here this morning was hearing today's gospel story for the first time. Most of us are very familiar with it. Fresh from his temptation experience in the wilderness, Jesus walked along the shore of the Galilean lake. He called out to several of the commercial fisherman casting nets into the waters there, "Hey! Come with me. I'll show you something about fishing: how to catch men and women." Did you ever wonder what they thought Jesus meant by that? I have. Matthew the gospel writer doesn't describe their thoughts. He says simply that they left their nets at once to follow him, as did two more fellows Jesus called out to a short time later.

Jesus was building his team. This skilled teacher and preacher was looking for people to help him spread his message. They knew how to spread their nets across the waters, but that was about it. What did they add to the equation? They weren't scholars of sacred writings. They weren't savvy public relations operatives. They weren't deep-pocket donors. They weren't well-connected power brokers. They were muscled, callused, tanned, fishy-smelling fellas who were connected to Jesus only by their common Jewish faith and heritage. How were they qualified to be disciples of Jesus?

For that matter, think back to today's reading from the Old Testament book called Judges about an Israelite fellow named Gideon. A little background for context: at this point in their history, the people of Israel had long ago finished their forty-year sojourn through the wilderness with Moses. They had crossed the Jordan River into the land called Canaan – the promised "land of milk and honey." The story says that over the decades the various Israelite clans had begun to adapt to the ways of the indigenous peoples there. They had adapted to the point that the Israelites were forgetting to honor their faithful, provident God and were conforming to the religious practices of the locals and worshipping their idols. The consequence

of the Israelites' faithlessness was that God allowed the indigenous peoples to dominate the Israelite clans. Local tribes like the one called the Midianites had hemmed in the Israelites, destroyed any crops they tried to grow, stole their livestock.

In the episode we heard this morning, a young Israelite named Gideon had managed to acquire some grain. To try to keep the bossy Midianites from finding out, Gideon was secretly threshing it—not on a threshing floor but in a wine press!—in order to be able to make some bread. As he worked, God sent a messenger, an angel, to Gideon. “The Lord is with you, brave and mighty man!”

Wait.... *Mighty*? He's beating stalks of wheat against a stone. *Brave*? He's hiding what he's doing from the neighborhood bullies.

God's messenger tells Gideon that he is to lead the Israelite clans in regaining their freedom and reviving their worship practices. Gideon's response? “But Lord, how can I rescue Israel? My clan is the weakest in the tribe of Manasseh, and I am the least important member of my family.”¹ How was Gideon qualified to lead God's people?

The Bible is full of instances when God seems to be calling the wrong people.

- God called Abraham's wife Sarah to become the mother of Isaac though she was way beyond childbearing age.
- God called oh-so-young Mary to give birth to God's savior.
- God called Moses to lead the Hebrew people, though Moses himself claimed to be a poor speaker (or perhaps having a speech impediment).
- Through the prophet Samuel God rejected Jesse's older, taller, more commanding sons in order to choose the youngest, David, to be king.
- God called Paul to spread the news of Jesus even though Paul had been aggressively persecuting followers of Jesus, and even though Paul possessed some unspecified physical impairment or deformity.
- And as we heard in this morning's gospel selection, God called four professional fishermen as a start to help Jesus in connecting with all sorts of men, women and children.

As I asked before, “How were they qualified for those tasks?” How was young Mary, of all people, the right person to bear the Messiah? How was David prepared to defend and lead the Israelite people? All the others—how could they possibly be qualified for what God had in store for them? In short: the grace of God. God's grace qualified them.

What situation in your life will God prepare you to face? What situation has God already equipped you for? For instance:

- First-time parents wonder how they'll know what to do with their precious baby.
- A daughter doesn't know how she's going to manage caring for her ailing, aged mother, especially because of how difficult their relationship has been for so long.
- You sense that a friend has an unspoken struggle going on, and you aren't sure how to invite him to accompany you to church one day.
- A graduate's joy at finally having that diploma in hand quickly turns to anxiety as that first day on the new job approaches.
- Even with orientation and coaching, a new deacon or elder wonders how they're supposed to bear the responsibilities of their elected office.
- After all those years of marriage, the one who finds him- or herself suddenly single worries about managing those additional responsibilities.

¹ Judges 6:15 Today's English Version

What was true for those fishermen and young David and old Sarah is true for us. God's grace qualifies us for whatever God wants us to become in order to fulfill God's plan.

So... what are we to do when we don't know if we're up to handling what we think we're about to face?

This is what we hear from the Bible. God says, "Trust me." There may be many times where *we're* not sure what God's doing, but in faith we trust that *God* knows what God's doing. According to the prophet Isaiah, ⁸"My thoughts," says the Lord, "are not like yours, and my ways are different from yours."⁹ As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways and thoughts above yours."² God chooses who God chooses. God equips as God desires. God uses us to fulfill God's plan... even when we don't understand that plan or can't even perceive that there is a plan.

But we are who God chooses. We are the ones into whose lives Jesus walks. We are the ones who are called and it is not because we have something to give or to offer as disciples. We are picked because God is the one doing the calling, no application forms, no pre-requisites, no interviews.

This is the way God works in the world. The ideas and possibilities that we imagine as successful—God avoids and ignores. The ideas and possibilities for which we can only see failure—God uses those to work in the world.

God gives up power to be born as a baby in order to save the world.

God preaches to and teaches crowds who do not listen and disciples who do not understand in order to show us the way.

God suffers and dies on a cross in order to bring New Life and a New Creation into being.

God calls the least likely and most ill equipped to be proclaimers of the Good News.³

Even when you may not feel up to the task, God may choose you anyway—so that as God works wonders through you, God's power and goodness may be displayed, and even more people will join you in learning to trust in God.

*Prayer: "Call us, Lord – the unlikely, the last and the least. Surprise us with your wild grace, your wisdom that is not the world's wisdom, your ways that are not the world's ways. Amen."*⁴

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² Isaiah 55:8-9 Good News Translation

³ Rev. Erik Parker, "I Will Make You Fish for People," *The Millennial Pastor: an iPhone Pastor for a Typewriter Church* at <https://millennialpastor.net/2020/01/26/i-will-make-you-fish-for-people/>, accessed 1/27/2020

⁴ Tony Robinson, "God's Preferred Material." *StillSpeaking Daily Devotional*, January 27, 2020, at dailydevotional@ucc.org, accessed 1/28/2020.