

Our readings this morning might be entitled “God makes three crazy choices”. Let us look at them in historical order.

In Genesis 12, we learn that 75-year-old Abram together with his wife Sarah who is a mere 65. is called by God to leave his country and his kindred and his father’s house to found a new people through his and Sarah’s descendants in the land of Canaan. The only problem is at 75 and 65 they have no children, so how can their descendants become a great nation?

The craziness of the choice becomes compounded in Chapter 17, when 24 years after God’s initial promise. God reappears to Abram now 99 and still without a child by Sarah. God changes his name to Abraham, and expands the original promise of his descendants becoming a great nation to Abraham’s descendants becoming a multitude of nations. And if that wasn’t crazy enough a son is promised to the 89-year-old Sarah. Isaac is delivered of Sarah when she was 90 and Abraham was 100.

Who in their right mind would entrust a 75-year-old to embark on a 25-year long project to build a new country and through a son set the foundations for a multitude of nations. When Sarah was told she would have a son, she laughed, but God said *“Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son. Is anything too wonderful, indeed!*

In our reading from the Letter to the Romans, Paul is writing to the Christian community in Rome some 7 or 8 years before the major persecutions and massacres of Christians occur at the behest of the Emperor Nero in 64. In the passage read this morning, Paul is using the story of Abraham to illustrate that promises or blessings do not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. *He (Abram) did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), and the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do*

what he had promised. Therefore, “it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

Now you may say to me, well this is just a report on the earlier crazy choice. But there is another crazy choice here: God chose Saul, the man who held the cloaks while the mob stoned Stephen to death, the man who was a renowned persecutor of any followers of Jesus, the man who was on the road to Damascus to expand his campaign against any believer in the Christ. God chose Saul, changed his name to Paul and set him to work building the church. It was, if Hitler had lived, as though the Allies made him the Secretary General of the United Nations. Yet again, is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

Now we come to the third crazy choice. In the Gospel of Matthew, just before the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus calls his first four disciples: Peter, Andrew, James, and John. He finds them at their nets. He tells them *Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.* A somewhat doubtful selection, what would quite likely illiterate and ignorant subsistence fishers on the Sea of Galilee have to contribute to spreading the truth. But those 4

choices are downright sensible compared to the next crazy choice, the calling of Matthew, the tax collector.

A word about the roll of the tax collectors in Palestine during the Roman occupation: the Roman occupying forces set the taxes and then used local tax collectors to gather the loot. The Romans, provided they received the revenue they had set, exercised no control over how much the tax collectors demanded. They demanded significantly more from the populace than the amount the Roman demand with the balance going into the tax collectors' own pockets. As a result they were universally reviled by the people. It was one thing to ask fishers of fish to become fishers of men, but entirely another to ask a tax gouger of men to become an agent of truth. Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

Of course the three choices on which I have focused are only crazy by the world's standards. Not one of them – Abram, Saul, or Matthew would have passed a resumé screening or a search committee interview. They would all have received a letter “thank you for your interest, but we have selected another candidate at this time”. But by the logic of God, they were entirely suited to

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accomplish God's will, not because of who or what they were, but because of what God chose to make them to be. If God wills it, the greatest reprobate can become a prophet of the Lord.

In our passage from Romans, Paul says *Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness*. This is a quote from Genesis 15:6 three chapters on from our passage. This passage is a clear statement of justification by faith. In other words we shall find salvation if only we trust in God. Abraham believed and he did what God asked him to do. Were there doubts along the way, were there periods of incredulity, did it not seem at time to make no sense – absolutely. But if we can trust in God all will be as it should become.

Something that our three crazy choices had in common: when called their response was immediate. Abraham packed up and moved. Saul did not stand on the road to Damascus and ask for time to wind up his affairs. Mathew did not reply, just as soon as tax season is over. It is clear that God calls people out of the ordinariness of their lives – not because they have spare time or are

bored or are even looking for a challenge. The word comes “Follow Me” and Abraham, Saul, Peter, Andrew, James, John, and Matthew followed. Not the next day, not after negotiating an employment contract, not after submitting notice. They simply followed because of the power of God’s call and notwithstanding their pasts, they trusted in God, and it was reckoned to them as righteousness. I remind you that righteousness simply means being in right relationship first to God and then to one another.

It is probably important to note, while the calls from God are very much calls to something, they are equally calls away from something else. Abraham is called away from his country, his kindred, and his father’s house. Saul is called away from persecuting the followers of the Way because as Jesus tells Ananias when he is reluctant to go near Saul because of his reputation, *Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before the Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel.* Matthew was called away from his sinful and unrighteous practices as a tax collector to become a disciple.

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It is equally important to note that the call to each of our three unlikely heroes is not about making their lives easier. It is about giving meaning and challenge to their lives, meaning beyond anything they could have previously imagined.

Our reading from Matthew concludes with the story of the woman who had suffered from haemorrhages for 12 years being convinced that if she can but touch Jesus cloak, she will be healed and with the story of the leader of the synagogue who comes to Jesus *My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.* The woman touches the cloak and she is healed; Jesus goes to the dead girl and she lives again. These are examples of the power, the dominion, and the compassion of Jesus. They are also examples of the power of faith and trust in God reckoned as righteousness by the synagogue leader in his grief and the woman in her distress.

So what is the message for us in these readings? Here are some thoughts:

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- **You are never too old to be called. If it can happen to Abraham at 75 and again at 99, do not imagine it cannot happen to you. Never imagine that you are unworthy or unable, because nothing is too wonderful for the Lord.**
- **God will never call you to some service without giving you the strength to perform it.**
- **Not all calls from God are as obvious as those to Abram, Saul, and Matthew. We could miss a call when we are preoccupied. Our spiritual practices should be focused on discerning call.**
- **Are we like the rich young man? *Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."* When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.**
- **Always remember Isaiah 6: 8, *Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?"* Will we like Isaiah reply, *Here I am, send me?* Or will we have excuses?**

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Let us Pray,

**Gracious God grant us the strength, the attentiveness,
and the openness of heart to discern your call to us.
Help us to overcome our obsessions with things and
with status that might prevent our being open to serve.
May we have the will to reply to whom shall I send,
*Here I am Lord; Is it I, Lord? I have heard You calling in
the night. I will go, Lord. If You lead me, I will hold Your
people in my heart*. Amen***

*Lyrics: Dan Shutte – Hear I am Lord