Sermon Feb 6, 2022 Epiphany 5 St. Thomas Anglican.

A young woman and her husband were on a tour of Kenya on behalf of the woman’s 56-year-old father who was in failing health. Just 6 days earlier they had flown out for several weeks away from home and heading to New Zealand and Australia after the Kenyan part of their journey. The 27-year-old woman was awkward and new in her public role. Born a princess of England, initially her father was second in line to the throne, but since age 10 and her uncle’s abdication in favour of her father, she was thrust into the role of the heir to the throne of England and her future was bound up in the monarchy. That future seemed far off. Uninformed about the true nature of her father’s condition she was anticipating years before having to take on the role of Queen. She had a calling yet to be fulfilled, but on Feb 6, 1952, while in the wilds of Kenya, she received the painful news that King George, her father had died. An immediate change of plans and the time for grief was brief, she immediately became Queen Elizabeth ii. In one of this is what she said:

‘I declare before you all that my whole life whether it be long or short shall be devoted to your service and the service of our great imperial family to which we all belong.

Queen Elizabeth’s statement is an example of the recognition of a life commitment to her calling and here 70 years later she still reigns with grace and wisdom, despite being in her 90’s living in a very challenging and changing world and dealing with loss of that life partner Phillip. I want to give thanks to our Lord for our Queen for the way God has worked in and through her as monarch.

Our readings today are all about a calling. A call from God. There is much that can be gleaned in the scriptures about calling. There are common points in each of these callings. The main thing which is evident is that God does call us into his service for his purpose. When he does call, our response is often to feel unworthy, inadequate and unable. Despite that sense of inadequacy God can address any barriers and lack of strength because He is the one who empowers, who guides and helps us as we do his will and follow that calling.

Let’s look first at Isaiah’s calling:

I can tell you one thing I am glad that I was called for this time rather than in the age when Isaiah was called as a Hebrew prophet. He was called during the years of the divided nation of Israel 738 BC which is identifiable because that is the year King Uzziah died and is mentioned. The people had completely stopped listening to God or following him. Isaiah was called to be the voice of the Lord in the land for over the reigns of 4 kings. Isaiah had been busy speaking out judgements of God prior to this heavenly encounter in Ch 1-5 but something happens that changes him forever. In Isaiah 6 we read about the heavenly vision that initiated Isaiah into a new authority in his role. He was taken to heaven and saw the Lord in his throne room with angels and seraphs around. He was a witness to glory. That glory inspired awe and fear.

*“Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”*

But his feeling of complete unworthiness and awareness of sin was quickly dealt with by the next action. He is cleansed by a hot coal placed on his lips. I want you to notice that when Isaiah laments, he mentioned living with a people of unclean lips. The coal that is placed on his lips is an action to give his words the power to bring cleansing words to the people.

He felt unworthy, he felt the weight of his personal shortcomings and he was cleansed. The next step was acceptance of the calling. In the passage we read,

*Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"*

Do you notice Isaiah’s answer – no hesitation now, Here I am! I am willing. It almost is like a teacher at the front of a class of young children asking for an answer. Do you remember the kid in the class who went OH Oh Oh with their hand waving high. I do.

Then he heard his assignment – to preach a message of judgment. A judgment so severe that when Isaiah heard it he asked For How Long Lord? This was not a fun calling. Yet Isaiah knew it was his calling to be God’s prophet and he did not draw back. It was a calling that demanded much from him. He also prophesied of the of restoration and the coming messiah. He prophesied accurately concerning Jesus. And today our understanding of God’s plan of salvation is helped in great measure by the prophetic words of Isaiah. Many of my favourite passages in the whole Bible is found in Isaiah: I have it written on the back of my cross today, I have called you by your name you are mine. Is 43:1

Now let’s go forward some 760 years to Jesus early ministry. Jesus is beginning to attract attention of the Jewish people. People follow him around the countryside and the crowds are too large to manage. So Jesus asks a fisherman who has just returned from a fruitless night of fishing to use his boat as a place to preach from set apart from the pressing crowd. The fisherman was Simon. It would have been just as easy to say no and go home, clean up and eat breakfast but Simon agrees and allows his boat to become a makeshift pulpit. Simon welcomed Jesus despite not really understanding who this guest was, in his boat. After concluding his message Jesus turns to Simon and tells him to again put out his nets to fish. Again, to a fisherman this would seem a useless endeavor, they had just washed their nets, it was daytime and casting the nets would likely accomplish nothing. Out of respect for the preacher Simon obeyed. This was an important test. Sometimes we must trust. As soon as Simon obeyed, the catch was so enormous that it almost broke the nets. Simon realizing the power of Jesus at that moment like Isaiah responded by recognizing his own inadequacy and sinfulness. *"Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"* Like Isaiah he felt completely undone by being in the presence of the Lord. And like Isaiah he was then called. *"Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.*  And finally like Isaiah he immediately followed that calling. The gospel says they left their nets and boats and followed Jesus. Simon Peter’s calling took him on a three year journey of being discipled by Jesus, experiencing great highs and lows but ending up as one of the key leaders of the apostolic church. He went from being a fisherman to being the one who in his first message following the day of Pentecost had 3,000 added to the believers. In Acts we hear that he was able to heal by the power of Jesus name and that people were healed by having his shadow pass over them or touching his garments.

Often when I read these call narratives I think that calls like Isaiah’s or Peter’s were special callings and they were special people not like me. When I look at the lives of other giants of the faith I feel quite insignificant. But I want you to really hear me in this.

There is no unimportant calling in Christ’s kingdom. There is no role too small. The only qualifications for service and calling are

Willingness, Awareness of my own weakness in my self – humility and character, Empowerment by Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, obedience to call.

I want you to take a moment to think about who you might think of as an example of someone who embodies living out Christ’s calling in their lives.

For me it is people like Desmond Tutu, Archdeacon Deborah who is my spiritual mentor, Bishop Victoria Matthews who is here in Thunder Bay at St. Michael’s – I hope you get to meet her – she oozes the Lord whenever you are talking to her. Our own Archbishop Anne who shepherds our diocese with such grace.

And there are also the less visible callings that are vital to our kingdom work. Later today at St. Paul’s and next week here at St. Thomas’ we are having our annual vestry meetings. Our annual reports are a testimony to the various callings that are active in the parish. We can rejoice in those who answer the call – Who shall I send? Will you serve and say I accept? Who will offer to be on the board? Is anyone feeling the call to the role of lay reader? – I have started to pray that God will call a few of you to being lay reader, it is a role that is a vital help to the rector. How about Scripture lector? Altar Guild? St Thomas church has so many great things going for it. You are a light in the midst of Westfort with the family giving centre. You have been able to keep worshipping, learning, and connecting via technology with the hard work of your video team. The wonderful musicians like Laura who plays the weeks I am here who have allowed us to enjoy worship despite being unable to sing hymns as community. You have an awesome rector in Pastor Jonathan who is welcoming and upbeat and infectious in his joy. It might be a stretch to take service, now is the time to prepare for the world to re-open.

There may be times we feel inadequate for the job, there may be times we focus on our failure and what is missing. But that is step one in handing our calling as a church over to Christ. If we humbly turn our lives to God allow him to work through us He will empower us for the work of ministry -effective ministry.

In closing I want to refer to The Queen, at 27 a young woman, she was thrust into her calling. Her coronation was much like an ordination. And she has humbly and graceful served with integrity and dignity and diligence right into her 70th year of reign. It is a great example to us all. To run the race and finish the course well in our life of service. It is something we can all aspire to.