

## Unlikely Heroes

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John 1:35-49

Talk about a mid-life crisis! I can just hear Peter and Andrew's wives saying, "You are going to do *what*? Why don't you just buy a little red convertible and be done with it?" One thing you can say about the Bible: it is full of surprises. O'Henry gets the credit for surprise endings, but surely he must have gotten the idea from scripture. Talk about a radical lifestyle change! Those men who made their living fishing in the Sea of Galilee went to work that morning, as they had for years, to haul in nets full of fish, and at the end of the day, they had new jobs casting their nets for the Kingdom of God with a young carpenter/rabbi from Nazareth. This was probably not in their original business plan.

### I

We probably underestimate how much faith was required of the disciples and their families to have dropped their nets and made such a huge lifestyle change when Jesus said, "Follow me." According to John's Gospel, the first thing Jesus did after John baptized him was to call his disciples. When John the Baptist called Jesus, "the Lamb of God," two of his own disciples were so impressed that they decided to leave John and to follow Jesus instead. When they asked Jesus where he was staying, Jesus replied, "Come and see." This may sound like an ordinary conversation about geographical directions to his hotel, but it turned out to be an exchange that radically transformed their lives.

They did go, and they did see. And they were so amazed at what they saw that one of them, Andrew, went to get his brother, Simon, who came to see Jesus too. When he decided to follow Jesus, Jesus changed his name from Simon to Peter, which means *rock*. Then Jesus called Philip who invited Nathanael, telling him that they had found the Messiah, who was Jesus of Nazareth. Understandably, Nathanael was skeptical, "Can anything *good* come out of Nazareth?" His question may be lost on us moderns, but what he was really saying was that can anything good come out of such a small, backwater village. People would have expected the Messiah, the Son of God, the new king of Israel, to come from Jerusalem, the royal city. In our day we would expect such a new world leader to come from Rome, Paris, or London, not Mebane, Knightdale, or Lizard Lick! But God has a knack for violating expectations and thinking outside the box – and for doing extraordinary things through ordinary people.

Remember what Goliath had to say to the young shepherd boy David on the battlefield? The Philistine giant had challenged the Israelite army to send their best soldier out to fight him, and now this little pipsqueak of a shepherd boy stood before him with a slingshot. Was this some kind of *joke*? Were they taunting him? He was insulted by such a mismatch. But David confidently looked him in the eye and informed the best that the Philistine army had to offer that he was not contending with flesh and blood but with the God of Israel who had sent him. And as the giant soldier laughed at such a preposterous idea, the shepherd's slingshot began to whirl. And before you could say Jack Rabbit, Goliath lay dead on the ground and young David was the man of the hour – not because of his own strength or ability but because God had been at his side.

Throughout scripture God calls *unlikely* people to do great things. And these people were able to do great things not because of their own abilities or strength but because they trusted in God to provide the wherewithal to do the job. One of the greatest military leaders of all time, Napoleon, once said that there were only two kinds of real power in the world: the power of the *sword* and the power of the *spirit*. And the power of the spirit is the strongest. Through the centuries, armies have marched and navies have sailed to conquer lands and empires, but in the end, the power of faith, hope, and love has captured the hearts and minds of billions of people and changed the world for good far more than force. Even Benjamin Franklin, the great American pragmatist, who was a Deist believing that God didn't meddle in human affairs, knew the value of religion to support the ideals and goals of democracy. He knew the power of the spirit.

## II

The writer of the Book of Hebrews wrote that faith is hope in things unseen. Right now, a cloud of anxiety and fear has descended upon American. Every day we hear bad news about our economy, and everyone wonders how deep and how long the recession will be. We cannot see the future, and so we are worried and discouraged. At the same time, there is a lot of goodwill and hope for our new president who will take office on Tuesday, a historic day in our nation. How fitting that the first African-American president will take office one day after the holiday honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, the man who more than any other helped set in motion the movement that made Barack Obama's election possible. But one could argue that his election was good news, bad news. The good news is that he got *elected*; the bad news is that

now he has to *govern* during the worst economic recession since the Great Depression. He needs our prayers and best wishes.

God's people have been where we are and a lot *worse* throughout the centuries. In the Psalms we find a lot of prayers to God called laments. They are honest complaints to God about how bad things have gotten and questions why God has not acted to save his people. Our offertory today is *No Body Knows the Trouble I've Seen*. This is an old African American spiritual that is taken right out of the laments in the Psalms. These complaints are graphically candid and offer up to God just how painful their situations are. Like a woman giving birth; husbands and delivery room doctors and nurses know what kind painfully honest language real pain can produce. That's okay; God can take it. He wants us to vent, to bring to him instead of leaving it bottled-up inside.

That is why confession is good for the soul. It is a tremendous *release* of negative energy that leads to relief. People often apologize when they break down and cry during a painful time – especially men. We ought to give thanks for these release valves called tear ducts that enable us to blow off dangerous steam that can cause the whole system to explode. In the midst of pain and doubt we find it difficult to see light at the end of the tunnel. We think, wrongly, that the pain will last forever and that we will never recover. At those times we have to call upon our *memory* of divine help in the past or depend on our friends who will remind us that it won't last forever, and in the meantime God is with us and will enable us to survive. In the *Diary of a Country Priest*, a minister goes to see a parishioner and friend who is in the hospital about to begin treatment for cancer. The minister asks his friend if his faith is strong enough to get him through this ordeal. The man looks his minister and friend in the eye and says, "I am afraid that it is not; for now, your faith will have to suffice for both of us."

### III

Isn't this what the Communion of Saints is all about? We are here for another to bear one another's burdens and to support the fainthearted. In most of the laments, a point is reached when all the ranting and raving *turns* from complaint to *hope*. The complainant remembers that God has acted in the past to deliver and this remembrance of God's graciousness and faithfulness creates confidence that God will act again. For God is sufficient. God is gracious and merciful. God can be trusted to keep his promises. The lament that Jesus began to utter on the cross, Psalm 22, goes, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Many have concluded that

Jesus must have given up on God at that point, convinced that God has given up on him. But those who know that he was quoting psalm 22 know that this psalm ends with words of hope and confidence, “God has not hid his face from him but has heard when he cried to him... the afflicted shall eat and be satisfied.” And as if that were not enough to encourage the afflicted, the very next psalm is Psalm 23, the greatest reminder in the whole Bible that God is with us to comfort us even in the valley of the shadow of death!

Times are tough right now. And they may get tougher before they get better. I would be disingenuous and unfaithful to my calling to stand up here today and say “don’t worry; be happy; everything is going to be alright.” That would be the Gospel according to *Pollyanna*. People are hurting; their pain is real. They need to cry out to God in prayer, and lean on friends and come to the church for comfort, support, and guidance. We all need to remember that we are not alone. The God who has brought us this far will continue to sustain us. It will get better -- eventually; this too will pass. We will survive. And along the way, God will be with us to hold us up.

Jesus’ honest cry from the cross did not prevent him from going through the pain of death and the humiliation of rejection and execution. He did die and he was buried in a borrowed tomb. But because of his faithfulness to God and his trust in God, three days later on Easter morning God’s power and grace had reversed the power of death, and Jesus was alive again. That is what we celebrate in the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper: the power of grace and love to overcome the power of sin and death: the power of the spirit over the power of the sword.

There is much in life and in our world that would discourage us and threaten to undo us, especially right now. But that is not the last word. God will have the last word through Jesus of Nazareth, Christ the Lord, the new king, who said “I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly. And come unto me all who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest.”

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? “Come and see.” Come to our Lord’s Table and see. Let us pray.

