

*Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. (Collect for Third Sunday after Epiphany)*

### **Sundays after Epiphany: a season of answering God's call**

On the Sundays after the Feast of the Epiphany, we hear lots of *calling stories*: God calls Samuel to become a judge/prophet for his people. God calls Jonah to go tell the people of Nineveh to repent and return to the Lord. Jesus calls his disciples, Andrew, Simon, Nathaniel, James and John. Jesus is assembling his cabinet, so to speak, but let's be clear: none of these guys had the faintest clue what they were getting themselves in for.

When God calls, people answer in various ways and to varying degrees of clarity and enthusiasm. Young Samuel was a little confused at first: "Hello? Who is calling, please?" Recalcitrant Jonah declined God's call to go tell Nineveh it was about to be destroyed: thus, he took a big detour through the belly of a whale before he arrived at the gates of Mesopotamia's Sin City. According to the writer of the Gospel of Mark, when Jesus says, follow me...the brothers just put their nets, got up and, apparently, walked off their day jobs. I can just imagine the responses of their significant others: are you crazy? How are we supposed to buy food and fix up the house and take care of your aging parents? Who is this guy, Jesus, anyway and what kind of job security is *he* offering?"

When I call and invite people to consider an undertaking for the parish, *a call to service*, I usually tell them, they don't tend to immediately drop what they are doing and rush over to the church. They, quite reasonably ask me to describe as best as I can what is needed of them. After all, you all are very clear that I am not God, and a call from the rector is not a automatic divine invitation to transformation.

Even so, even here at St. Luke's; I think especially here at St. Luke's, faithful people learn to listen for a still small voice within that says, "listen. listen. The Holy One is trying to me/you something." Sometimes God calls you quietly at a young and tender age. It may not be clear. It may be short on details, but God's calling. Sometimes God find you even when you have been swallowed whole by your darkest fears and tells you, "Guess what? I can lead you out of this darkness and into a whole new way of life." And don't you know, oddly enough, you hate him for it and then thank him for it. (There are people sitting here this morning who know plenty about darkness, and hardship, and also know that God has carried them through it.)

And sometimes, in fact often, just when you are minding you own business, going about your daily work return at school, at work at home, there can be a call from some manager, or coach, or teacher and all the sudden, for reasons you can't possibly understand, your life is turned upside down. And then...as your heart is racing and your fears are exploding and your head is spinning, you hear that small voice of God who calls and reminds you: "I am here. I love you. I will never abandon you. You will be just fine."

For Godly reasons and sometimes for far more human and mundane reasons, like a faltering economy, we find ourselves faced at unexpected turning points, with challenges and opportunities we hadn't imagined. Our response, according to the collect and, I would suggest, under any circumstance is to, best as we can, to identify where God is in the situation, listen for his/her voice, and answer as readily as we can in a way that demonstrates our faith in our Lord. We must be ready to answer that call. We must be ready to tell the good news of salvation, especially in difficult times. And here's the good part, we must be ready to perceive, as the collect says, to see whole new dimensions of God's glory at work in ways we might not have imagined.

***Could you imagine that during a season of extreme financially turmoil and uncertainty, that pledges to the 2009 annual budget at St. Luke's would go up by over 6%?***

***Could you imagine that during a season when it might be prudent to cut back on expenses and be a little more cautious with our time and talent, that this parish would find all sorts of ways (Silent Auction, Alternative Gift Fair, Share your Christmas,) to increase its outreach to the sick, the poor, and those who live in the shadowy margins of our community?***

*Could you imagine that a church that in many ways loves to sit back in its White Anglo Saxon Protestant comfort zone would warmly embrace the sacred music of many cultures, such as a jazz vespers and spirituals as well as discern a call to offer English classes to people of cultures?*

*Could you imagine that during a year when there have been so many deaths in our congregation; deaths of people we love and miss and grieve for has also been a year in which by almost every measure the life and vitality of this congregation has increased?*

I want to just pause here and note that our pastoral care volunteers and bereavement committee as well as your clergy walked through the valley of the shadow of death with seventeen families this year. And in the companionship at various bedsides, with the warmth and hospitality of food and hospitality and with the beauty of our liturgy we told hundred and hundreds of people that St. Luke's is place that with all kinds of people and always and under all circumstances find a genuine and gentle way to say "Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!"

Don't misunderstand me: I do not for one second believe that the death of one member is merely offset on the parochial report by the baptism of another. What I *am* saying is that I don't have to imagine a church that perceives the glory of God in all seasons of life: I have seen it in you. I don't have to imagine a church that mourns with the grieving and celebrates with the joyful: I have seen it.

Well of course you don't have to imagine this either: this is glory of the Lord you have seen with the eyes of your own faith. St. Luke's has been ready to answer to the call. St. Luke's has been ready to proclaim the good news of Jesus. And we see in our hearts and our lives the glory of God's marvelous works.

### **Answering the call at St. Luke's**

I think most of you here today understand that you were called into ministry at your baptism. And there are many ways, over time and over our lives to live out our ministry to the glory of God and in service to one another.

Frankly, you are really quite wonderful in terms of being ready to respond to God's call. This is evident in a couple of different ways:

Our "systems" pieces are really good and strong: (though, of course, they could be stronger and better.) I would like to particularly commend our Sunday morning cohort of worship ministries: the altar guild, the ushers, choir, lay readers, the offering counters, the Christian formation teachers and coordinators, the Eucharistic visitors, the acolytes, Jan, Joe and Jim. We have a fantastic, talented and dedicated team of worship ministries.

But we all realize, right, that all the activity and beauty and energy we see on Sundays is just a glimpse, a tip of the iceberg of time and talent that goes toward these efforts. It is easy to take these day in, day out, week in, week out ministries for granted. Pray God, we don't.

Systems pieces also include the work of the Stewardship Committee, the Magnetic Church Committee, the hospitality committee, the Christian formation committees and all those groups of lay people that just, frankly, keep the motor running, the doors open, the heating system and the financial systems running.

Our outreach ministries continue to be a source of inspiration to many. Spring Fling, Silent Auction; the Belize Mission teams, IHN volunteers, Habitat for Humanity, Urban Ministries, WISER, Durham Congregations in Action, Duke Pediatric Bone Marrow Transplant Unit. La Iglesia El Buen Pastor. From the earliest years of St. Luke's history our outstanding preschool and kindergarten have been the signature outreach ministry of this parish. And now the English for Speakers of Another Language becomes our latest. These are just a few of the efforts that benefit from the time talent and treasure of you, the members of St. Luke's. But in addition to these day in/day out efforts, you have also been willing to take on singular events of outreach hospitality. If you did not have the pleasure of being present at our dinner for people who were recently homeless and now living in their own homes, then you missed the blessing of seeing all kinds and conditions of God's children sitting around tables in Johnson Hall, breaking bread together and being filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. In December, during all the business of the holiday season, St. Luke's was ready to answer the call and blessed to be touched by angels who dined with us that holy night.

This morning I can't mention everything, but let me also just call your attention to the various ways this parish strives to make the sacraments accessible to as many people as possible. You can see this is two very different ways: we should be so grateful to our Eucharistic ministers who take communion on Sundays to those who cannot be present with us. These visitors are really, in themselves, living sacraments: they are outward and visible signs of God's inward and invisible grace. They embody our answer to Jesus when he called Peter to "feed my sheep."

Yes, but here is a very different example of making the sacraments accessible: this is embodied in the work of our Site Plan Committee. The top priority of re-designing and improving the exterior of our buildings and grounds is to improve accessibility for all God's children to get safely and comfortably into the church. These means paying attention to seemingly mundane things such as parking and signs and impervious surfaces. These means how to make sure that the world can see and find St. Luke's, but that we don't have to see quite so much of the world as it idles on the exit ramp if Interstate I-85.

## Looking Ahead

We've had a really remarkable year. Let's don't be proud of it; just grateful for it. And maybe even a little nervous about it. For as Jesus tells his disciples

*From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.* Luke 12.48

During such tumultuous economic conditions all members of the church - from the vestry to the Sunday School teachers, from the clergy to the Sunday morning hospitality coordinators - all of us must balance prudent stewardship of our expenses while also remaining ready to answer urgent calls for assistance and take prayerful risks for the sake of the gospel. Even in these difficult and uncertain times I believe St. Luke's has what it takes to readily answer the calls for good stewardship as well as courageous and sacrificially ministry on behalf of those living on the most fragile margins of community. Just like those first disciples we may not know or understand what in ahead, but all we've been asked to do is follow Jesus.

When you stop and think about it, those disciples took an enormous risk when they dropped their nets to follow Jesus. The disciples couldn't really understand what they were getting into. Mostly they wanted a miracle worker/superhero to ride into Jerusalem and solve all the problems. Oddly enough, even when Jesus performed miracles, they couldn't quite understand his calling.

We can't know with any certainty what made those first disciples drop their nets and follow Jesus. What was it his voice? His eyes? His presence? What was it about those fishermen? Were they particularly courageous or particularly discouraged or just especially gullible? Can't really know. But somehow...somehow, they were ready. They were ready to hear and obey. They were able to recognize that a divine opportunity of a lifetime was set before them, if they could not only look up from what they doing. Not only look up....but get up..... and follow Jesus.

All kinds of things known and unknown; planned and unplanned; joyful and even tragic - prepare us to see and to hear and to follow the call of God. In other words it is your ability to live faithfully in your daily lives that prepares you, when asked, to move into anew even risky direction. Thank you, St. Luke's, for being ready to follow Jesus.

## Priorities for the Coming Year

In closing, I want to mention just briefly what my hopes and priorities are for the coming year: I am asking the vestry to create three new committees to enhance the ministries of this parish:

- I have asked the vestry to appoint a worship committee to get input from the parish about what is working in terms of our worship life and what could be improved. This will be a time limited committee to bring recommendations to me by late spring.
- I have asked the vestry to initiate a long range planning process for our parish. This will be the topic of our vestry retreat in late February. *Where there is no vision, the people perish*, the prophets warned

ancient Israel. I think we are at a time in the life of the parish where it is critical to be as clear as possible about our vision for the future and the resources necessary to pursue that vision.

- I have also asked the vestry to form a personnel committee. The care and nurture of the outstanding staff of the parish is critical to the health of the entire parish. Though the canons of the church give a lot of power to the rector in terms of the responsibility for hiring and supervising staff, I need plenty of good help in doing this well.

Lively worship, a clear vision for the future and the care and nurture of our staff. These will be important initiatives for this coming year. But these endeavors are only support structures to our overarching hope: Our constant hope is to readily hear the call of our Lord, to eagerly proclaim the good news of his mercy and love and to stand back in awe to see the glory of God working in us more than we could ask or imagine.

I want to close by asking you all to remember these St. Luke's members and others with personal connections to our parish family who have died since our last annual meeting:

Aiden Davis Riggins

Leonora Arthur Coleman

Ella Marie Bell Herndon

Kenneth A. Podger

Virginia Spell Sprague

Jane-Ellen Guitierrez

Carolyn Hooper Satterfield

Mary Deloise Parker Bhansingh

William Austin Allwood

Fred B. Williams

John A. Satterfield

Mary Catherine Reedy

Marion Cecil Ernst

Patricia Ann Breedner Spencer

John David Shytle

Glenn Wilson Walters

Harold Albert Serra

Let us pray:

*We do not count these friends as lost, for they have gained eternal life . But we give thanks for the blessings they were to us and those they loved. And we hope to live out our own days to the glory of God, in the name of Jesus, loving our neighbors as ourselves. AMEN.*

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that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works;  
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