

Epiphany III (A)  
*Isaiah 49.1-7/Psalm 40/I Corinthians 1.1-9/John 1.29-42*  
St. Paul's Church, Halifax  
20 January 2008

God's Move is the First Move

~Paul H. Friesen~

'The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me.' These are the words of the prophet Isaiah, about himself, for us this morning.

'The one who sent me...said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend is the one...;" is the Son of God.' These are the words of John the Baptist about Jesus, for us this morning.

'Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus...to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints.' And these are the opening words of the *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, also for us this morning.

This morning we need to talk about what it is to be 'chosen' or 'called'—chosen as individuals, as families, as a church—by God.

This language of being 'chosen' or 'not chosen' might immediately bring back bad memories of being chosen last or next to last when teams were being made for sports or games. Or it might rouse intellectual anger in us. What about non-Christians half way around the world—or even in our city? How can it be their fault they've never heard the call of the Christian God—surely they're not 'un-chosen', are they?

On the other hand, it's not that we always want to hear ourselves called. Children have what we might call 'a hearing problem' when they are called away from what they are enjoying to meals, or to a little talk about their behaviour, or worse yet, to bedtime.

And then there is the adult version of the hearing problem, first publicized by Adam and Eve: "They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid..."<sup>1</sup>

We all know what it is like to avoid meetings with God—or to want to avoid meetings with God—when it comes to personal prayer, or family prayer, or parish worship. Sometimes we have good reasons, but often we don't, because like Adam and Eve we are afraid of God, of what God might say or what God might ask us to do.

Well, these are the problems that come up when we talk about being 'chosen' by God. We can't answer them on the spot. But we can listen in on the conversation the Apostle Paul had with the church in Corinth. As you can see on our schedule for the next three weeks, our Sunday morning readings take us through the first chapter of the Apostle's first letter to the Corinthians.

There's actually quite a bit of 'calling' going on today. The opening words of *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* are: 'God *called* to be an apostle...to the church of God that is in Corinth...*called* to be saints, together with all those

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 3.8-10. All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless noted.

who in every place *call* on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours...God is faithful; by him you were *called* into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.'

So our job this morning is to sort out this business of God calling us and us calling on God. How does this work?

One of my favourite (dead) theologians brought to life by InterVarsity Press— a theologian sixteen hundred years dead—nails it all with one sentence: 'We are called because it seemed good to [God] not because we were worthy.'<sup>2</sup>

*We can only call on God, because God has called us (and still calls us), has chosen us (and still chooses us), to join his family.*

As Christians we confess that God's move is the first move. It's sometimes called the doctrine of divine grace. We might say we haven't heard God's call. But God has certainly called us and still calls us, calls us this morning.

If we didn't really believe this we wouldn't baptize our infants, and we wouldn't gather around the Lord's Table week by week. But we do. We believe in God's unmerited, unearned favour. We believe that God loves us because God made us. That's why God calls us. God's move is the first move.

We don't baptize infants because they have earned the privilege. We don't eat Christ's bread and drink Christ's wine because we were very good in the preceding six days.

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<sup>2</sup> John Chrysostom, in the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: 1-2 Corinthians*, ed. Gerald Bray (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), p.4.

Our ancestors in the faith, the earliest church, learned to call this the greatest 'heresy'. We don't earn God's grace.

We know the criticisms of people who have stopped attending worship in any church—or never started. They say: 'Churchgoers are hypocrites. They think they're so good. They behave as if they are chosen and pretend they are above sinning. But they're worse than the rest of us.'

Sometimes they're wrong. It is their own refusal of God's grace that keeps them away, their sense that they are better than churchgoers, more moral, more honest. We can't fix that.

But sometimes these folks are right in their criticisms. We have gotten the whole thing turned upside down. We have begun to think God loves us because we're a cut above other mortals. And we've begun to think we exist to fix up the poor folks outside the church.

We need to remember one simple truth from the Apostle's letter: *We can only call on God, because God has called us (and still calls us), has chosen us (and still chooses us), to join his family.*

And if we know this truth and feel it, we might begin to answer the critics: 'You're right, we slip into hypocrisy. We shouldn't! We're sinners like you who don't deserve God's favour. But God loves us anyways. Do you want to join us?' It is true that God has called us to be 'saints'. The Apostle Paul says this at the very beginning.

But we have to remember, always, that it's God's calling us by name, God calling us into a local church, that is the basis of our sainthood. So we can call each other saints. To be a

saint is to know that God has called you. Saints are not born, we might say. Saints are not born, but made—made by God.

*We can only call on God, because God has called us (and still calls us), has chosen us (and still chooses us), to join his family.*

Now we get to the second part, the part about calling on God, worshipping God, serving God.

The Apostle Paul says to the Corinthians that there are saints everywhere—to quote him: ‘all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.’

God has given us everything we need to answer his call. And that is what saints really do in worship and the rest of life—they call back to God. They respond. They respond out of what God has created them to be. They respond out of their redemption by Christ. Whatever gift of God to the human race we have damaged or destroyed, Christ has returned to us by his self-sacrifice on the cross.

We’re here within the walls of St. Paul’s with the same gifts that the Corinthians were given by Christ.

St. Paul put it this way: ‘In every way you have been enriched in [Christ], in speech and knowledge of every kind... so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift.’

We call out to God out of what God gave us when he called out our name, what we were given even before we knew we were given it.

And what is the point of it all? The last verse of this morning's reading goes this way: 'God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.'

*God calls us so we can call back and begin a conversation, continue a conversation, to enter into fellowship.*

But its not a 'me and Jesus' relationship the Apostle is talking about. But it is a personal relationship like a good personal relationship within a family—it isn't exclusive. We enter into fellowship with each other, when we enter into fellowship with Jesus Christ. We're called to both.

We shall discover, if we read Paul's letter, that the Corinthians were a 'problem bunch' of Christians—it was a church riddled with prejudice and scandal. But they were called as we were called, to celebrate God's love in Christ, to answer God, to enter into fellowship with each other.

So we can say:

*We 're sinners, just like the Corinthians.*

*We're called by God, just like the Corinthians.*

*By the gift of Jesus Christ, we join in fellowship.*

Amen.