

## Homily for Sunday, January 18, 2026



Although not obvious, there is a common thread in all three Scripture stories we have today.

They are all stories of someone being called by God which should get us thinking about our own call.

Along with being called is often our

relentless low opinion of ourselves countered by God's high estimation of us. If we let God's opinion win out, we become—like every Saint in the history of the Church—useable and pliable in hands of God. Being willing to be used is the only thing God needs from us to build the Kingdom here on earth. Let's just settle the dust by saying up front, "We all have a calling from God and not just priests and those in religious life."

Like all faithful prophets, Isaiah doesn't speak his own words but God's words. I'm not sure if God is speaking about the nation of Israel or about Isaiah himself, but God says in that first reading, ***"I formed you in the womb to be my servant."***

Maybe it's left vague deliberately—like so many other things in the Scriptures—so that we can never say, "God is just speaking to Isaiah, and what God says to Isaiah surely doesn't apply to me." The truth about the Scripture is that it's always about me when I read it and always about you when you read it. You and I were also formed in the womb to be God's servants. God had a plan for each of our lives, for the Church, for the world, long before we were old enough to figure it out. While

living out my own call, my own vocation, I can make a generalization about every one of us here—our vocation is to be a witness to God’s love in the world. That’s it. It’s not more complicated than that, except for the fact that when I try to put into practice being a witness to God’s love in the world, I probably fail more than I succeed. This might be discouraging from my perspective, but it never lessens the call from God’s perspective. Failure doesn’t shut down the call for one moment. Isaiah was right—the call has been there from the beginning and for those of us who are baptized, the call becomes even more concrete.

In a similar manner, Paul, in that second reading, sees himself as being called. The opening line is a little audacious, a little bit cheeky and presumptuous on Paul’s part. The letter to the Corinthians starts this way, “***From Paul, called to be an Apostle of Christ Jesus...***” You might ask: Who made Paul an Apostle? Traditionally, the Scriptures speak about disciples and Apostles, but I often use the terms interchangeably. They are not quite the same thing. Usually, the word “***disciple***” meant a “learner” or a “follower”. Anyone who follows and learns from Jesus’ teachings was considered a disciple. I hope we are all striving to be followers and learners of Jesus’ teaching and never stop doing so until we draw our dying breath. The term “***Apostle***” meant someone who was specifically sent, with Jesus’ authority, to spread the gospel. If that’s the case then before an Apostle is sent out into the world, that person must first learn to sit at the Master’s feet and be willing to learn to be a follower of Jesus. It only makes sense if you’re going to pass on faith, you should first seek that faith for yourself. While there were many disciples, traditionally we speak of the 12 Apostles. Paul was not one of the original 12, so is it a little presumptuous that he refers to himself as an Apostle

and not just a disciple? No. It's not arrogance on his part. Paul is a person who has paid his dues by learning and following Jesus, who, by the way, he never met in person. Nevertheless, Paul sees himself as being sent into the world as an Apostle. He's not arrogant, he's just trying to be faithful to what God is asking of him.

Before we get into splitting hairs about the difference between a disciple and an Apostle, a better word to describe them and us might be the word "witness." I think John the Baptist, in today's gospel reading, saw himself entirely and uniquely as a "witness." John the Baptist goes deep in one area. He's not a jack of all trades. He came to do one thing and one thing only—to bear witness to Jesus, to point the world to Jesus. He doesn't apologize for not being all things to all people all the time as long as he can say, "**There's the Lamb of God.** There's the One who is all things, the Alpha and Omega. The baptism I'm offering is for the washing away of sin so that you can have a fresh start with this Jesus who can give you something I can't give you—the Holy Spirit. So, keep your eyes on the prize."

Twice John the Baptist says, "**I myself don't know him.**" By saying that, John is just being honest. I find it strange that John, a cousin of Jesus, and who probably grew up in the same area would say, "I myself don't know him." A personal experience helps me understand this.

In June 1989 I ascend the stage at the National Art Center, in Ottawa, to receive my Bachelor of Science degree in biology. Within 10 seconds, as I was descending the stairs on the other side of the stage, a revelation hit me, "Phil, you don't know anything about biology. Give the diploma back!" Now that wasn't totally true as I

did work my butt off for three years studying and doing lab work. But I was still being honest when I felt I didn't know anything about biology. In the massive field of biology, what I know is almost negligible. It's a drop in the bucket that feels like nothing. So now I know, when John the Baptist said he didn't know Jesus, he may have been saying, "What I know about Jesus is nothing compared to all that he has to reveal to the world. His life and his wisdom are too rich for my words to even begin to explain."

Although John the Baptist claims not to know Jesus, nevertheless, he witnesses to something he cannot deny. John the Baptist says that he witnessed God telling him to baptize the One on whom the Spirit descends and remains. John says, "It actually happened that way. I did witness the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove and remain on Jesus." It's as if John the Baptist is saying, "I may not know much about this Jesus, but I cannot deny what I witnessed, what I experienced." Once you see it, you can't unsee it. Once you hear it, you can't unhear it. Perhaps that's what we're all called to be—witnesses to God's love in the world. Do we really need to be anything more?

When Jesus stands before Pontius Pilate, just hours before his crucifixion, he says, "I was born and came into this world to bear witness to the Truth. Everyone who cares for truth, who has feelings for the truth, recognizes my voice." So, Jesus sees himself as a witness. He wants his life to point others to the Truth, the truth about God's love for the world. When you look at all the Saints they had one thing in common. They didn't claim to have the best knowledge of God, but they were all

witnesses of what God was doing in their personal life and what God was doing in the world.

Sr. Joan Chittister wrote, ***“Once upon a time a disciple asked the holy one, ‘Holy one, what is the difference between knowledge and enlightenment?’ And the holy one said, ‘When you have knowledge, you use a torch to illuminate the way. When you are enlightened, you become the torch to lead the way.’”***

Perhaps that’s a clue as to why Jesus began his public ministry not by drawing attention to himself but by telling us the truth about ourselves. He said, “Don’t ever forget, ***you are the light of the world***. I’m putting you on a lampstand so that when people see your light they will trace your light to your Father in heaven. Through you, others will experience God.”

*“By the end of the first century, 400 Christians had multiplied to one-half million. How was it possible? They were compelled Christians. They had not many professional evangelists. They were all evangelists. They had few great preachers. They were all witnesses. They had few foreign missionaries. They were all missionaries”* (Jesus the Revolutionary by H.S. Vigevano)

*~Fr. Phil*