

Homily for Sunday, January 25, 2026



One possible theme that courses through all three readings is this idea that someone, or some group of people, is being called by God. And of course, since

God's Word is a living word, and we are listening to that living word, this call must apply to us just as much as it applied to people in Biblical times. It's God who initiates it, but it's up to us whether we respond or not to God's invitation, God's call. Don't just think of a calling as a one-shot deal that once we figure it out we simply spend the rest of our life coasting. People will sometimes say to me, "When did you receive your call (to the priesthood)?" I don't know how to answer that question except to say, "I'm still receiving it." I've never seen it as a "one-and-done" deal. Our calling is as complex as the unfolding of our lives. God's invitation is much more a persistent nudge than a one-time flashing neon sign in the sky telling us exactly what to do and when to do it. I also want to add that if God calls us to something, God will provide us with the grace to live that call.

In that first reading from the Prophet Isaiah, God is calling the people of Israel to live from a place of hope. You'll recall that reading as the one you heard on Christmas Eve. The country of Israel then, very much like the Ukraine today, was

being taken over, bit by bit, by an aggressive country, Assyria. Assyria chose the two weakest regions of Israel, Zebulun and Naphtali, and invaded them first. Bullies always pick on the weakest, whether they are schoolyard bullies, corporate bullies, or heads of state bullies. Cowards always target the vulnerable. Isaiah reminds the people of Zebulun and Naphtali, that while they walk in deep darkness, God's light will shine on them. God has not forgotten the weak and vulnerable but has a plan for them. From the midst of the darkness they are living in, a great light will dawn. The burden and the bar of oppression will someday be lifted off their shoulders. A day will come, because it is God's will, when Israel will once again rejoice as farmers rejoice at the harvest. It seems to be God's great delight to raise up the lowly and to tell the "unimportant" people of this world, "You matter to me, and I have big plans for you." You people of Ukraine, you people of Gaza, you people living on the streets, you people suffering in loveless marriages, you people who are abused, forgotten, and lonely, God has a plan for you, a plan of hope. While you sit in darkness and the shadow of death, it will not be permanent. Someday, the light of God's love will dawn on you. That's God's call. And we respond to that call by being light, in our own little way, to all our brothers and sisters who sit in darkness.

Speaking about calls, we have the classic story of the first four Apostles being called. All of them were fishermen, brothers Peter and Andrew, as well as brothers, James and John. Twice it says, "*Immediately*, they left their nets, their boats, and their father." I often questioned this "immediately" business as being a little "fishy." Now I don't think it's so fishy, at all, that they left everything immediately. These guys were not gullible. They weren't falling for some smooth-

talking snake oil salesman. They were searchers. Anyone who has ever asked-- even within a perfectly happy marriage, a job that is fulfilling, and being financially set— “Is there anything more to life than this?” was, in my mind, entertaining a call from God. I believe this is what Peter, Andrew, James and John were mulling over in their minds for a long time and probably, because they were men, didn't share these yearnings with anyone. When that “more-ness” of life appeared, a more-ness they always desired, it came in the person of Jesus. He simply said, without any need to convince them, “Come, follow me.” They recognized it immediately as the very things that had been tugging at their hearts for so long time. Now was the golden opportunity to seize the day.

Christian hope is like that. You may not know or be able to name what you are hoping for, but once it appears, you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that this is the very thing your heart has always desired. You don't have to think about it. You don't have to weigh the pros and the cons; you just leave everything behind and you step forward in faith.

I often have to chuckle to myself at the choices Jesus made in calling the 12 Apostles that he did. He didn't choose academics vying for jobs at the synagogues, nor did he choose guys who knew how to market his message with convincing argument or catchy slogans. Instead he looked into the eyes of crude and uneducated fishermen and admitted them into his school and entrusted to them the task of changing humanity. It was Zebulun and Naphtali all over again. It was God calling the people who grew up on the “wrong” side of the tracks, the weak,

the vulnerable, the unimportant with a plan that would change the world forever. What confidence, what trust, what risk-taking on Jesus' part!

Even more daring, more risky, is when Jesus sent his Apostles out two-by-two. Jesus may have done something as foolish as pairing Matthew with Simon-the-Zealot, two guys who could not be more different and diametrically opposed to each other. Matthew was a tax collector who collected taxes off the backs of his fellow Jews and gave the proceeds to the enemy, the Romans. Simon, on the other hand, was called a Zealot because he was zealous for all things Jewish and hated all things Roman. Like almost everyone else, Simon-the-Zealot, would have despised Matthew as a traitor. Yet, Jesus called them both to be his followers and may have sent these opposites out together to spread the good news. What was Jesus thinking of? He was thinking of you and me. He was thinking of the Church in the year 2026 and how we are a mishmash of all kinds of people even people who seem to be polar opposites.

The truth of it is, we need a few people in our lives, and in the life of the Church, who are not just like us. Without them, we would do everything to avoid being stretched and would remain in our tightly constructed circle. In fact, there would be no growth at all in any of us. The very people I initially want to push away because they don't think like me, believe like me, vote like me...have been the very one's who are most responsible in helping me grow into the child of God I was always intended to be. I can only admit that, though, after the fact. If I push them away, I do so in arrogance. Once I think I have the only or the best way of thinking, I convince myself I don't need anything or anyone challenging me. When

that happens, I entrench myself into my own camp and say, "I'm for Apollos," or "I'm for Cephas," or "I'm for Paul," or, worse than ever, "I'm for me."

I need a Matthew or a Simon-the-Zealot to challenge me and remind me that my calling, my vocation, is always about Jesus and the Kingdom he came to proclaim. When I realize that, the thick darkness gives way to a great light, while the nets, the boats, and everything I thought was so important *immediately* falls away to a higher call.

Jesus, the gambler, gambled on them and continues to gamble on us.

~Fr. Phil