

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
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Unlikely Heroes

The situation goes from bad to worse. The battle rages on. Good people fall before the evil force that threatens to destroy the world. Our only hope is that one, small, plucky, unlikely hero who alone possesses the knowledge that will save the day. This one person, insignificant in the eyes of anyone who observes without really seeing what is inside. The heart of a hero beats within. But there's no time to waste. Our hero must get on with the mission. After all, the world won't save itself. Just when it seems all is lost, at the very last possible moment, the amazing, yet humble, hero, against all odds, and in the face of great adversity, delivers the vital news that is crucial to salvation. Whew! That was close.

Of course, I might be talking about any of several Hollywood blockbusters that is out in theaters now, or for that matter, just about any film from a number of different genres that was ever produced—action, adventure, science fiction, fantasy... possibly even a romantic comedy, if the saving news is that the hero is in love with the girl. That story has been repeated endlessly with different characters in different situations with different bad guys. We love that story. We pay good money to see that story over, and over, and over again. It never gets old. I think that one reason we love that story is that we can see ourselves in it. We can see ourselves as that one, small, plucky, unlikely hero. It's a great fantasy. You or I could be the one who makes all the difference. No matter what humble beginnings our life may have, there could be an incredible destiny that awaits us. At any moment the series of events that transforms us from an ordinary person into a hero may begin. That's a pretty exciting prospect. You have to admit it.

That must be how Isaiah felt. “The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother’s womb he named me. He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away.” Talk about a sense of destiny. Remarkable, isn’t it? Isaiah sees his mission as nothing less than the complete restoration of the nation of Israel after the Babylonian exile. In fact, his mission gets much bigger pretty quickly, doesn’t it? “It is too light a thing,” God tells him, “that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” Isaiah’s going to save the world! Well, not just Isaiah, he is going to be used by God as an instrument of God’s salvation. And well, not just Isaiah himself, but the whole nation of Israel will be God’s servant to bring about this salvation.

So what do we make of this one, small, plucky, unlikely hero? Well, we as Christians read this a specific way. Jesus comes out of the Nation of Israel. Through his goodness, love, and sacrifice he saves the world. So, it’s all about Jesus, right? He’s the Lamb of God, like John said, who takes away the sin of the world! Jesus is the savior. He is the hero. But wait! This story has a twist. Just as God needed Isaiah to send the message of salvation to the people of Israel, Jesus is not able to save the world by himself. Think about it. He doesn’t need anyone’s help to do what he did, to die on the cross, and to rise from the dead on the third day, but he obviously needed help for something, or else he wouldn’t have called twelve apostles. What did he need those guys for? They never really understood what the heck he was talking about. They never seemed to get things right. They argued with each other. Their faith failed them at critical times. But Jesus needed them. Why?

If a savior dies on a tree and no one is there to hear him, does he make a noise? Or another way to ask the question: If a savior dies on a tree and no one tells the story, does anybody know about him? Of course not. Jesus *is* the hero of the story; he *is* the savior of the world. But the story teller is God's chosen instrument of that salvation, like Isaiah was. Jesus' hero is the one who tells his story. He chose the twelve. They were just ordinary guys. Andrew and his brother Simon Peter were just fishermen. No one would have expected greatness from them, least of all themselves. No one even expected them to smell good. Yet they delivered the vital news that saved the world. Who'd've thunk it? They came from such humble beginnings too. They were small... plucky? sure, but... unlikely heroes. Can you see yourself in this story?

How does it make you feel when you hear God's voice in your head saying to you, "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth?" Does that give you a sense of destiny? Does it give you a sense of purpose? A sense of responsibility, like the fate of the world is in your hands? It should. Remember, no self-respecting, unlikely hero ever started out feeling really sure of him or herself. None of them ever started out seeking greatness, nor did they ever believe themselves worthy of it. It is always the circumstances of life that lead them into a situation where they must act, they must choose, where they must overcome their own insecurities and personal failings, reach down into reserves of strength, courage, and nobility they weren't even aware they had, and become the hero that is required for that time. That's the whole point of unlikely heroes... they're unlikely!

Of course our reserve of strength, courage, and nobility is infinite, as God is faithful to those whom he calls to be his heroes. You see, unlikely heroes never do it on their own. They always get help from their friends. And more than that, there always seems to be some unseen force that moves them toward their destiny and seems to shape the course of their lives. Their

cause is so great, and their purpose so true that their success, however improbable, is practically guaranteed. It's as if cosmic forces are working out some ancient script, restaging an old story with new actors each generation, where good and evil clash, and the triumph of good is inevitable because it was accomplished long ago.

Go ahead. Be a hero for Jesus. Tell his story in whatever way the circumstances of your life allow. Even if you reach only one person with the vital good news of salvation, you will have fulfilled your mission of being a light to the nations. Jesus can't save the world without you. He has chosen you. And if you say, "Well, that's unlikely," then I say: how very plucky of you.

Amen.