

Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 2, 2008, Year A

**St. Bartholomew's Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ - Associate Rector      Scripture: 1 Samuel 16:1-13

***"God Loves To Do Extraordinary Things With His People"***

**God loves to do extraordinary things with His people!**

Time after time, throughout the Holy Bible, we have been blessed with accounts of how Almighty God has enabled and empowered ordinary people who have put their faith in Him – and how they responded in faith and how they accomplish remarkable things – extraordinary things, all for His kingdom, for His Glory.

Going back to Genesis 6 – God told Noah that He would surely destroy all the earth – that he should build an ark – Imagine this: the creator of the universe tells you that He is going to wipe the slate clean and that you are going to be the chalk that begins again along with your family. God said: *"I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark-- you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you. You are to bring into the ark two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you."* (Genesis 6:18-19) Noah, showing absolute faith in God, gave God permission to use him and his family for God's own purpose and accepted the covenant that God established. Now, we all know the rest of the story – don't we? Two by two they enter ark, the raven, the dove, the olive branch, the rainbow, the promise... **God loves to do extraordinary things with His people.**

In Genesis 17, verse 3 – we read of Abram, at 99 years old – Abram fell face down – then God changed Abram's name and established a covenant with him. God said: *"This is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you."* (Genesis 17:4-6) Here is an older man and his wife, who are childless and full of questions – given a promise that they would have a son named Isaac- upon whom God would build a mighty nation – numerous and strong – and the everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. In faith, they agreed to God's covenant and gave Him permission to use them for His purposes. Of course – we know the rest of the story: the son Isaac, the mountain, the knife, the ram, Ishmael, and the promise fulfilled. **God loves to do extraordinary things with His people.**

Genesis 37-50 tells us of one of Abraham's descendants – Joseph, the son of Jacob, the grandson of Isaac. He was sold into slavery through the jealousy of his brothers. God gave him the ability to interpret dreams – which leads to his finding favor with Pharaoh. He knew and trusted God, and in faith gave God permission to use him as an integral part of God's plan for His people. Joseph's father and entire family eventually move to Egypt and of course you know the rest of the story – the 7 years of plenty, the 7 years of famine, the twelve tribes, and the people of Israel living in Egypt, but eventually falling into slavery and bondage. **God loves to do extraordinary things with His people.**

The Book of Exodus gives to us the account of Moses and his remarkable life – chosen by God to lead His people from slavery. A Jew, who was sent as a baby to the daughter of Pharaoh, to be raised with royalty, returns to his roots and meets God as a burning bush. God uses Moses, to challenge Pharaoh, deliver plagues, and ultimately deliver them from bondage. God uses a man who has killed, and is less than perfect, to be His servant. He was filled with questions – but nonetheless, was filled with a remarkable faith in God, and God used him to lead His people from bondage. You know the rest of the story – the Passover, the parting of the Red Sea, his brother Aaron, sister Miriam, the golden calf, the Ten Commandments, the pillar of fire, the

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cloud of smoke, the Tent of Meeting, the staff, the rock... **God loves to do extraordinary things with His people.**

In 1 Samuel 16:1-13, today's Old Testament reading, David is chosen to be king of Israel and anointed in the presence of Jesse, his father and all of his brothers. God uses Samuel to seek, find and anoint His king. In 1 Samuel 17 – David willingly takes on Goliath, the Philistine giant, and through God's power the giant and the Philistines are defeated. David gave God permission to use him, in building Israel to strength and unity, transforming a shepherd boy into a king. I am sure David had question – but faith in God let him forge ahead. You know the rest of the story, the Psalms, five stones, the sling, fleeing from Saul, Bathsheba, Uriah the Hittite, Nathan and repentance, the threshing floor, Solomon... **God loves to do extraordinary things with His people.**

In the Gospel of Luke 1:26-27 “*God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.*” Mary was told by the Angel that she would be with child, who was to be named Jesus, and that He was the Son of God. God filled her with incredible faith – faith enough to give God permission with her life to do His will. She knew that nothing was impossible with God. “*I am the Lord's servant,*” *Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.”* (Luke 1:38) Nazareth, the size of a modern day football field, would be the childhood home of the “*Anointed one of God.*” This event, often called the Annunciation, transformed this young maiden into the one who would carry the Messiah. And of course you know the rest of the story, Elizabeth, John the Baptist leaping in the womb, the Nativity, being present at the crucifixion, and the resurrection... **God loves to do extraordinary things with His people.**

Matthew's Gospel tells us of a carpenter named Joseph who was “*pledged to be married*” to Mary. God chose this man to be the guardian of the human race, the earthly protector and father of the child Jesus. In Matthew 1:20 “*an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”*” Joseph, filled with a whole lot of questions, but an incredible faith in God, gave permission for God's will to be done, and willingly obeyed. He accepted Mary as his wife, and at the time of the census, took her to Bethlehem, where the son of God, Jesus, was born. The angel warned him of Herod's plan to kill the infant boys and told him to take Mary and Jesus, fleeing to Egypt for safety. You know the rest of the story, the donkey, no room at the inn, the shepherds. The wise men, the stable, leaving the twelve year old Jesus at the Temple... **God loves to do extraordinary things with His people.**

Jesus chose twelve men to be His Apostles – each one of these ordinary men showed remarkable faith by saying yes to Jesus' call – and gave Him permission to use each one of them for God's Kingdom. Fishermen, brothers, a Tax Collector, a Zealot – these men were called from different walks of life to become “fishers of men.” They obediently left their old lifestyles to follow the Son of God and be transformed into His disciples. We know they had questions, but they also grew in faith – faith enough to eventually die for the One they followed. Some were crucified, stoned to death, and as we know of St. Bartholomew – he was “flayed” or skinned alive – (see the shield with the three knives on our gates) and then beheaded. They knew that Jesus lived, died, and rose again – ascending to the Father. Their faith in Him was great enough to spread the Gospel as Jesus commanded in Matthew 28:19-20 “*Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the*

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*Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*" Their faith in Him was great enough to be martyrs for the church. You know the rest of the story, the miracles, Matthias chosen to be Judas' replacement, the Day of Pentecost, the Acts of the Apostles, thousands coming to Christ at a time... **God loves to do extraordinary things with His people.**

Each one of these heroes has been used in a powerful way by Almighty God – to touch others, to lead the way, sharing Christ and the Gospel, to be a shining example of what Faith in Him can do. There are so many more instances and people who we could talk about, to share their stories and how God has used them and their gifts. That would take hours – wonderfully powerful hours, but in the interest of time...

I would like to share with you the story of a wonderful young woman from Western New York. Some might say that she was dealt a difficult hand by God in life, or that her parents were challenged by her special needs. My wife Marilyn and I were privileged to attend a breakfast at which she was honored. God asked Marge and Chuck Taylor to trust Him, and the blessing that came from that faith is their daughter Beth. Please watch this short excerpt from a video presentation by Heritage Center.

At the end of the video, you saw two of the other young people who are part of Heritage Center – but more importantly – part of God's plan. Each of them are made in God's image – reflecting a different part of who God is – each of them reflecting His great and never ending love. How often we forget that and label people who are handicapped as deficient or worse. God's image is never deficient.

There have been questions, difficulties, and long hard mountains to climb, but by the grace of God – He has led Beth, Chuck and Marge, in faith to where they are today. As you saw, Beth is an accomplished athlete in rowing competitions, an honored member of the Team at Top's Market. As a matter of fact – they bring Beth in for special charity fund raising events because of her unique skill of interacting with people, of touching hearts personally, and showing them the possibilities through faith in God. It is a great honor to share a part of Beth's story with you today – along with the courage and love of her parents, Marge and Chuck, and the dedication and care of Heritage Center. The rest of Beth's story is still being written – and we pray will continue to glorify God in her life. **God loves to do extraordinary things with His people.**

At St. Bartholomew's we currently have Confirmands in training – 9 youth and 10 adults who are freely giving God permission to work in their lives. God called them and they said yes. They had questions – but through faith in Him - each one has given Him permission. Look at what God has done in the lives of so many when in faith and relationship with God - He is given permission. **God loves to do extraordinary things with His people.**

9 years ago – I can tell you that I would never have expected to be standing here today, being used by God in this way – as a minister of His Church – of His people. Nine years ago –He made the call on my life abundantly clear – and I have willingly given Him permission to lead me – and use me for His purposes.

I ask you to look around you, today – here in this Church and see brothers and sisters in Christ – many of who are here today in response to God's call – who have given Him permission to act in their lives – who have opened the door of their hearts to Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. They have responded to Jesus invitation in Revelation 3:20 *"Here I am! I stand at the*

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*door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.*"

I ask each one of you, today, to ask yourself "what can I do for God's Kingdom?" "How can God use me for His purposes?" "What is the call that He has placed on my life?" I pray that your response will be one of faith – and permission for Him to use you for His glory, for His Kingdom, and for His purposes. You see, my brothers and sisters: **God loves to do extraordinary things with His people.**