A church that was in the process of hiring a pastor. It wasn't a United Methodist Church, where the pastor is appointed. It was a denomination that went through the long process of receiving applications, interviewing candidates, listening to sermons, and so forth. Bill, one of the members of the official search committee was beginning to lose his patience with the rest of the committee. He'd seen the committee reject applicant after applicant for some minor fault. He decided it was time for some soul searching on the part of the committee. So at their next meeting Bill stood up and read a letter he said had been received from another applicant. He read:

Gentlemen: Understanding your pulpit is vacant, I should like to apply for the position. I have many qualifications. I've been a preacher with much success and also have had some successes as a writer. Some say I'm a good organizer. I've been a leader most places I've been.

I'm over 50 years of age and have never preached in one place for more than three years. In some places, I have left town after my work caused riots and disturbances. I must admit I have been in jail three or four times, but not because of any real wrongdoing.

My health is not too good, through I still accomplish a great deal. The churches I have preached in have been small, though located in several large cities.

I've not gotten along well with religious leaders in the towns where I have preached. In fact, some have threatened me, and even attacked me physically. I am not too good at keeping records. I have been known to forget whom I have baptized.

However, if you can use me, I promise to do my best for you."

Bill looked at the others and asked, "Well, what do you think? Shall we call him?" The others were appalled! They responded; "What? Consider a sickly, troublemaking, absent-minded ex-jailbird? Are you crazy? Who signed the application? Who'd have that kind of nerve?" Bill finally smiled and replied. "It's signed, The Apostle Paul."

Well, maybe Bill helped put things into perspective for that committee. He certainly gave them something to think about. From his letters that became part of our Bible, we know that the Apostle Paul was all of the things that committee accused him of being. He often caused trouble with the message he preached, he spent time in jail, he had some kind of health problem, his "thorn in the flesh". And yet through all of that he was used by God in a mighty way.
He changed many lives during his ministry. And the words he left behind are still changing lives today. Because Paul answered the call of God on his life, and allowed himself to be led and used by God.

In the scripture reading I read earlier from the fifteenth chapter of the first Letter to the Corinthians, Paul acknowledges that it is purely by the grace of God that he is able to accomplish what he has, and to serve as he does. He writes:

"For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them - though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me."

All throughout the Bible we have account after account of people who were chosen by God to carry out a particular task or ministry. And time after time we see that the people God chooses are not the powerful or popular people of their day. Most often God chooses just plain ordinary people. And sometimes he even chooses people with a questionable past.

Think of the list. Abraham, an ordinary and old man, and Sarah, his aging and barren wife, chosen to be the ancestors of a great nation. Moses, a man who had fled Egypt after killing an Egyptian, and one who considered himself slow of speech and tongue, chosen to go before the Pharaoh himself and to lead the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt. David, a young shepherd boy, chosen to be a great king. Mary, a young unmarried woman chosen to bear the son of God. Peter, a rough fisherman chosen to be the rock upon which Christ would build his Church. Paul, a man who hated and persecuted Christians, chosen to be an apostle of Christ.

By our modern standards, most of those folks seem like kind of ridiculous choices. And we might wonder why on earth, with a whole world full of people to choose from, God chose those he did. And why did Jesus, with so many educated, "religious" people around, choose a bunch of common old fishermen to be the core of his disciples? Have you ever wondered what would have happened if Jesus had chosen his disciples by our standards instead of by God's standards, if he had looked at resumes and test results instead of hearts? If Jesus had used our standards and turned over a list of potential disciples to a consultant firm to be interviewed and undergo psychological and vocational testing, he might have received back a letter like the following:
To: Jesus, Son of Joseph  
Woodcrafter Carpenter Shop  
Nazareth  25922  

From: Jordan Management Consultants  
Jerusalem  26544  

Dear Sir:
Thank you for submitting the resumes of the 12 men you have picked for management positions in your new organization. All of them have now taken our battery of tests; we have not only run the results through our computer, but also arranged personal interviews for each of them with our psychologists and vocational aptitude consultant. The profiles of all tests are included and you will want to study each of them carefully.

As part of our service for your guidance, we make some general comments, much as an auditor will include some general statements. This is given as a result of staff consultation and comes without any additional fees. It is the staff opinion that most of your nominees are lacking in background, education and vocational aptitude for the type of enterprise you are undertaking. They do not have the team concept. We would recommend that you continue your search for persons of experience in managerial ability and proven capability.

Simon Peter is emotionally unstable and given to fits of temper. Andrew has absolutely no qualities of leadership. The two brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, place personal interest above company loyalty. Thomas demonstrates a questioning attitude that would tend to undermine morale. We feel that it is our duty to tell you that Matthew has been blacklisted by the Greater Jerusalem Better Business Bureau. James, son of Alpheus, and Thaddeus definitely have radical leanings, and they both registered a high score on the manic-depressive scale.

One of the candidates, however, shows great potential. He is a man of ability and resourcefulness, meets people well, has a keen business mind, and has contacts in high places. He is highly motivated, ambitious and responsible. We recommend Judas Iscariot as your controller and right-hand man. All other profiles are self-explanatory.

We wish you every success in your new venture.

Sincerely yours,  
Jordan Management Consultants  
(author unknown)
But Jesus didn't use our standards. He used God's standards. He looked into men's hearts and said, "follow me" to the most unlikely characters. And they followed. And in spite of all of their faults and failures, they were used by God in a big way. God called and used people (and in fact he still calls and uses people) that often seem like the least likely, the least qualified. I don't think that's accidental. God knows what he's doing. Maybe the most essential quality of those whom God calls is that they are people who will let God be God. They are people who know that they cannot possibly do what God has called them to do unless it is by the grace of God.

In today's scripture readings we hear about three men who were chosen and called by God, each for a particular ministry. What is common to all of them is the feeling that they are unworthy in the sight of God. Isaiah finds himself in the presence of God and his response is: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!". The disciples had been fishing all night and caught nothing, and then, after following Jesus command to let down their nets again, they catch boatloads of fish. Peter recognizes it as a miracle and his reaction is to fall at Jesus' knees and say, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Paul writes, "For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." Isaiah, Peter, Paul. In the presence of God, all were overwhelmed by a sense of their sinfulness, their unworthiness. Yet all finally said yes to wherever God would lead them, and by the grace of God, did great things.

And that's pretty typical of those God calls. If you read through your Bible you just won't find many accounts of people who are called by God answering, "Well good! It's about time you called someone worthy! I'll do a great job for you, God!" Instead you will find time after time, people who are overwhelmed, humbled, puzzled, reluctant, and even scared to death when faced with God's call to follow. And I am sure that is because it is precisely those folks who have a sense of their own unworthiness that God can use the most. Because they do not lean on their own strength, but on the strength of God. They know that they are only able to stand, only able to follow where God is leading, only able to do the things that God has called them to do, by the power and grace of God.

When I started seminary I thought that I would feel out of place. That I would be the only one that had drug my feet so long, had taken so long to finally give in and respond to what I knew to be God's call for my life. I thought that I would be the only one who still felt scared to death and totally inadequate when I thought about where I was going. But, to my relief, when we began sharing the stories of our faith journeys and our calls to the ministry, I found that I was not alone.
Time and time again people told of dragging their feet, of trying everything they could to avoid God and God's call on their lives, they spoke of being unsure of where they were going, of only knowing somehow that God was leading. Much like all who are called, all who are used by God.

God calls and uses the most unlikely people. People who feel frightened and overwhelmed at the prospect. People like you and me. God calls us to follow. To share God's word, God's love, God's light with those to whom God would send us. The good news is, to those God calls, God also gives the strength to follow. God answers our fears, faults and failures with his forgiveness and strength. When Isaiah felt unclean the seraph touched his mouth with a live coal and said, "Your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." And Isaiah boldly answered God's call with, "Here am I, send me." When Peter was frightened, Jesus said to him, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." And Peter left everything and followed. Paul felt unfit to be an apostle because of his past. But he was able to say, "By the grace of God I am what I am."

We may feel God calling us to any number of different tasks, great and small. And chances are good that we may feel totally inadequate and weak in the knees at the prospect of answering that call. But God is God. And God has proven over and over that his power, his presence, his grace is sufficient. So if we hear the call of God in our hearts, asking, "Whom shall I send?" By the grace of God, may we be able to answer, "Here am I; send me!"
BENEDICTION:
Go forth now as God's servant.
Remember God's presence often,
  Draw strength from the knowledge that
the One who calls and sends also sustains.  Amen.