My name is Bryan, and I am an aspirant, a fancy Episcopal word for “person taking the first steps toward ordained ministry,” which is how I have come to shadow Pastor Kate this summer. I am also a novelist and a teacher in the English department at Butler University, so it won’t surprise you to learn that I love stories and thinking about how stories work.

Our gospel reading makes me think of the work of Joseph Campbell, the mythology scholar who found a pattern running through stories from many different times and places. Campbell called this pattern the “monomyth,” but today, it’s better known as “The Hero’s Journey.”

Don’t worry: I’m not about to deliver a lecture on the literary theories of Joseph Campbell. I’m not qualified to do that, anyway. I’m an artist, not a scholar, and I know just enough about the hero’s journey to plunder it for my own stories.

Today, I just want to touch on the first two stages of the hero’s journey. The first stage is a “call to action.” Our readings today are littered with calls to action, from God’s nudge to “be fruitful and multiply” . . . to Paul’s advice that sounds like a mini-graduation speech (“listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace, etc.) . . . to the marching orders given by Jesus to the disciples at the end of Matthew’s gospel.

Onto stage two of the hero’s journey. A call to action is followed by the hero’s response, which is almost always a resounding “ . . . no!” . . .

The hero’s refusal doesn’t last, of course. If it did, the story would be very short. Eventually, the hero accepts the call, and the journey lurches into motion.

We see this pattern of refusal in many stories in the Bible. When Moses is called, he says, “I think you dialed the wrong number . . . Let me put my brother on the line.” Jonah says, “I’ll run away to the sea, where God will *never* find me.”

A call, followed by a refusal: why do we see this pattern in story after story? Because it provides tension and conflict, which is fuel for stories, sure. But I think there’s a deeper explanation, too. I think it mirrors a pattern from life, a common truth about the human experience. No matter your culture, no matter your era, a call can be scary.

There are so many reasons to decline a call. Fear. Self-preservation. A desire to honor existing obligations or responsibilities at home. A feeling of unworthiness.

How did the disciples react to the call in our gospel? We don’t know because the curtain im*med*iately falls on the scene, but I imagine they hesitated and maybe even resisted the call for all the reasons I just listed . . .

Or maybe I just want to believe they resisted because that’s what I did . . . when God called me. . . .

Let me tell you *that* story.

When I was in college, I worked at a Lutheran church camp for a couple of summers. One night, I was talking with a group of high schoolers. We were in the lodge at the top of a hill. The power had gone out, and the only light came from the moon on the lake. We got on the topic of the mindless mumbling of prayers you sometimes hear in church, and I wondered out loud what would happen if we said the Lord’s Prayer together, but slowly, really thinking about what we were saying, trying to mean every line, every word.

So we did—and there, in the darkness and togetherness, I felt a presence behind me, as you might sense a wolf outside your tent. Every hair on my body was raised. As we prayed, I heard a voice in my mind: *This is what you’re meant to do*.

When the prayer was over, someone took my hand. I looked up to see everyone holding hands. A rough circle, a closed circuit.

After the campers went back to their cabins, I sat on a log and *sobbed*, though I couldn’t have said why I was crying. It wasn’t until later that night, after I pulled myself together and returned to my cabin, that I thought about what the voice had said—*This is what you’re meant to do*—and I wondered: What is *this*? . . .

You might think I was on fire with zeal after that experience. That I dedicated my life to pursuing the answer to that question. I did . . . *not*. The truth is that I kind of froze.

I was a*fraid*. Afraid that people would think I was crazy if I told them about my experience at camp—so I told no one.

I was afraid, too, of where God might lead me if I answered the call. What if the path was hard and uncomfortable? What if I proved inadequate? Deficient? Un*worth*y?

The internal voice of unworthiness is so powerful, isn’t it? It can stop a call from God. *You’re not good enough*, it said to me. *Not holy enough. Not faithful enough.*

It also said, *You’re too young* until the day it started saying, *Now you’re too old. You missed your window.* Doubt is nothing if not adaptable.

But listen to what God is telling us in the gospel. The disciples went up the mountain, and “when they saw [Jesus], they worshiped him, but some doubted.”

What happens next is remarkable. Jesus does not send the doubters home. Doesn’t even scold them. He commissions them along with the rest. He includes them in his call.

Here is the good news I have for you today: Doubt is *not* a disqualifier. If you have doubt in your heart, you are not unchristian. You are, in fact, human. You are, in fact, included in God’s love and God’s call.

Sometimes people talk about doubt and faith like a spiritual light switch. Either it’s switched on with faith or off with doubt, one or the other—but that’s not how it works. In reality, we are swirling clouds of faith and doubt all the time. Sometimes there is more doubt in our spiritual whirlwind, sometimes more faith, but it’s never just one or the other.

Sometimes doubt points outward. Maybe you wonder if God is really real. Maybe you’re a little iffy about certain lines of the creed.

Sometimes the doubt is self-doubt . . . Maybe you wonder if you’re strong enough. Good enough. *Wor*thy. Maybe you want to say, like Moses, “I can’t do this. Send someone else. Please.”

And God says, “I choose *you*. I call *you*, with your imperfect faith. You don’t have to be doubt-free before you follow my call—which is good because you will *nev*er be doubt-free. And stop *worry*ing so much about being worthy. The worth isn’t in you; the worth is in my call.”

Like all preachers, I’m preaching to myself. I’m especially preaching to the younger version of myself, who was not moving through his doubt. When we left my call story, Young Bryan was stuck in the stage of refusal. So what moved him from no to yes? What overcame his fear and self-doubt enough to get him moving? Two of the most powerful and common instruments of God’s action on this planet: a community and a story.

Three years ago, I enrolled in Education for Ministry (also known as EfM), a four-year program of study designed by the School of Theology at Sewanee. In weekly meetings with a small group, we study the Bible and church history and theology.

Education for Ministry is *not* designed to be a feeder program for the priesthood. One thing I love about the Episcopal church is that it recognizes four orders of ministry: bishop, priest, deacon, and lay ministry. In other words, ministry is not just for the ordained. Ministry is for *every*one, and *every*one is called to ministry. The mission of EfM is to help each person figure out their ministry in the world.

Week after week, our small group wrestled with scripture and each other. Week after week, we grew closer to each other and closer to God.

At the beginning of each year in EfM, each person tells their spiritual autobiography. Every year, you tell a new version. In my second year, we met in an outdoor garden in the fall because even though the days were growing shorter, the weather was still pleasant. I had prepared a story, but as I listened to others share their autobiographies, I soured on mine. Something about it was too safe, too guarded.

When my turn came, I surprised myself by ditching my prepared material. Instead, I told the story of my encounter with God at camp.

I had never told this story to anyone, even my wife, who I tell *everything*. I was still afraid they might think I was crazy. But I had a new fear, too, and this one might have been scarier. *I believe you*, someone might say. *How could you ignore this call for nearly three decades?*

Telling the story felt like a huge risk, but something about this night and this group let me take that risk.

Maybe because the sun had gone down and we were sitting in darkness, like that group of high schoolers in the lodge so many years ago.

Maybe because I loved and trusted the people in this group.

Maybe because God was nudging me. *It’s time.*

It was not easy. My voice was tight; my heart was fluttery. I choked up a few times, but no one hurried or interrupted me. They sat with me in the darkness as I found my way through the story, its own kind of journey. When I came to the end9, they did not scoff at the possibility of a mystical experience or shame me for burying that call for nearly thirty years. Instead, they talked to me about it. Asked me questions. Wondered out loud with me, those gentle agents of God.

For so long, my call had been dormant. Telling that story stirred it up. This time, I didn’t freeze. I prayed for guidance. I journaled about my hopes and questions and insecurities. I talked with my priest, my spiritual director Kate Wilson . . . my Bishop. I followed the path that has led me here today. Where does the path go from here? I don’t know, not exactly, and that’s still scary. But I trust that God will show me if I keep paying attention.

Friends, my time is short, so I will leave you with a few questions. Choose *one*, and let it haunt you in the best way.

For some of you, the right question may be: What is God’s call for your life?

For others, the right question may be: What is God’s call for this *season* of your life?

Or maybe you already *have* a sense of your call, but something is stopping you from exploring it. For you, the question might be: What is stopping you? Is your doubt pointing outward … or is it self-doubt?

I say to you, to myself, to all of us: Faith is not the absence of doubt. Faith is the courageous movement through doubt.

May God grant us all that courage. Amen.