Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight O Lord our Strength and redeemer. Amen.

Some fifteen years ago an Australian miner, and that’s M I N E R - made the discovery of a lifetime. On the very last day of his mining career, this gentleman whom we know only as “Bobby,” was handed one final bucket of dirt to sift through by a team-member. As he looked into the bucket, his eyes caught a crude, medium-sized rock with one little portion of it shining. He took it home and for weeks he chipped away at the rough exterior with a dentist tool. Six months later, he came forth with the rarest, most precious opal that has ever been discovered. Illumined at every angle by green, turquoise, and blue colors, the opal was registered at 306 karats. It’s been called the “Hope Diamond of Opals,” and it’s priceless. When interviewed after his great discovery, Bobby said in his distinct Australian accent, “It was an act of God…you only get such things when the good Lord’s ready to give them.” I don’t know about you, but I’m ready to get some things like that.

I share this little story with you because in some ways it’s analogous to the priceless treasures that we find tucked away in our Bibles, like the story we just heard from the book of Numbers. Most of us are familiar with what we might call the big stories (or the big rocks) of the Bible: Adam and Eve, Noah’s ark, Daniel and the lion’s den, David and Goliath. In the New Testament, we think of the stories of Jesus - his command over the storm, the feeding of the 5,000, certainly his death and resurrection. And these stories are of great importance to us in that they form the very backdrop of our lives, framing our experiences and offering insight into our own life-situations. As important as these big stories are, if you chip away and get down deep into the bedrock of the Bible, you discover that buried there, are these precious little stories as well – like rare jewels tucked-away of incredible worth. Many of these stories are only a few lines long, some just a few phrases, but if we pause long enough and hold them up to the light we find they carry gigantic truths for our lives.

Our 1st reading this morning from the Book of Numbers chapter 10 is just such a story. It consists of only one paragraph, and concerns a man we never hear about again. But like that rare opal, it brings immeasurable value for us. The context of the story is straightforward: the children of Israel are about to cross
the desert to claim the promised-land. They’ve come through the Red Sea, they’ve been given the 10 Commandments, and now they stand at the threshold of a great journey. While there’s a great deal of excitement in the air, there’s also concern. They know that the journey will be full of difficulties and dangers. No one knows that better than their leader, Moses. As Moses is going through the camp readying and rallying the people to move out, he comes to Hobab, his brother-in-law, son of Jethro (or Reul as our translation read), and pleads with him to come along. You see, Hobab was a Midianite, not a Hebrew. And although Hobab recognized the God of Israel, he came from a people who followed other gods, who embraced other customs, and made their home in the Sinai Peninsula. So Moses pleads with Hobab to come along with God’s people that he might become one of them as it were, and experience all the blessings of God’s inheritance. In Numbers 10: 29, Moses says to Hobab, “we are setting out for the place the Lord has given to us, come with us, and we will do good to you, for the Lord has promised good to Israel.” Hobab declines. “I won’t go,” he says. “But instead, will return to my own land and my own kindred.”

Now it’s worth it to say that Hobab’s reply is not really a refusal, but a common sense decision to go back to what he knows. He’s not from the place where the children of Israel are going; he has interests that are worth pursuing back home in Midian. He’s got a family that probably doesn’t want to uproot and move. No doubt, he loves Moses, and is happy for God’s people…but he’d just rather not go. So, Moses comes back and makes a second plea. And it’s this second plea that is so pivotal for us today. In verse 31, Moses says, [Hobab], “please do not leave us, [please]. For you know where we should camp in [this great] wilderness, and [what’ more] you will serve as eyes for us [on this journey].” It’s a qualitatively different kind of appeal…

There’s a great scene in the opening chapter of The Hobbit, where Gandalf, the good wizard appears, quite unexpectedly at the home of Bilbo Baggins. Almost immediately Gandalf starts talking about adventures and danger and journeys to far-away lands, and dragons. At first, Bilbo refuses to entertain these ideas, but then the really unexpected happens, and 13 dwarves proceed to enter Bilbo’s house and help themselves to all his food and drink. If you know the story, you know that Gandalf has indeed planned an adventure. He’s putting together a crew of characters to journey to the far-off lonely mountain and there, confront the dragon, Smaug, who, for a generation, has laid dormant in that mountain, taking for himself the dwarves’ home and all their treasure, and gripped the entire land in fear. The reason Gandalf has come to Bilbo’s home is that Bilbo is needed. Bilbo is a Hobbit and we all know that Hobbits have certain skills: They’re stealthy and quiet, and as such they’re good burglars, they have excellent hearing and good vision in the dark, they’re stouthearted and courageous; not to mention they can go for long periods of time on very little food, and they’re very good at riddles and pithy sayings. At first the dwarves don’t see the value in bringing this hobbit. But Gandalf reminds
them that there is a lot more to Mr. Baggins than they can guess, and a deal more than he has any idea of himself. Indeed, they may all possibly live to thank him. Gandalf is really pleading with Bilbo; he’s making an appeal. He’s saying, “Come with us, for we have need of you. There are certain skills and abilities that you have, without which this mission will fail.”

This is precisely what Moses is saying to Hobab. As they stand at the threshold of this great and perilous adventure, Moses is saying, “Hobab, please do not leave us, for you have skills that we need; you know this land; you know where we’re to camp, and you will be like eyes for us.” You see, Hobab knew the territory – this was, after all, his desert. He knew how to navigate it better than anyone else. He knew were the dangers were, the perils, the watering holes, the smooth tracks, the rough places, the enemies. And so Moses is saying in essence, “Hobab, if you won’t come for your sake, then please, come for OURS. We need you! Your abilities are of instrumental value to the people of God.”

If we listen closely to this story, we can hear that great appeal that Christ makes to each one of us. On the one hand, Christ says “You need ME. For the forgiveness of sins, the gift of salvation, the peace of knowing God and the joy of everlasting life…you need ME! So, for your sake, follow me. On the other hand, Christ says in some sense, “I need YOU! The kingdom of God needs you, for there is a great task that only you are fitted to accomplish…like Hobab, you have special skills, talents, and abilities that are of instrumental value to the people of God, and to this generation.”

The theme for this Sunday as we continue to walk through our mission statement is “going in service…” But rather than just say we ought to go in service, this passage gets at the heart of the issue: namely there are specific tasks and labors that you were meant to do in this world. God has created you with skills, gifts, abilities even a personality without which the kingdom of God will be a poorer place. Psalm 139 tells us that each one of us is “fearfully and wonderfully made,” “knitted together in our mother’s womb,” “intricately woven” for God’s great purposes. In Ephesians 2, we’re told that we are “Christ’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” This is important, because some of you have never really looked at yourself like this - as someone for whom God has destined to make a great contribution to this world.

When I was a junior in High School, I had a friend named Mike who was our starting Middle Linebacker on our football team. Mike was an incredible athlete and very tough football player. He stood probably 6’2, weighed around 200 lbs, and he could hit like a truck. I remember one night coming back from a
game we’d just lost, to a team that we were supposed to beat. And as our bus pulled out of the parking lot Mike’s father came up and started pounding on the window with his fist telling Mike what a “no-good player he was” and that “he was worthless,” that “he didn’t matter.” We were all shocked. For one, Mike was the best player on our team. But we were also shocked that his father would do that. The bus finally pulled away and we all began trying to console him, but it was to no avail. He’d heard this before. In a very telling reply, Mike said, “No he’s right, I’m no good, I’m an awful player, and I don’t matter.” Now maybe this is an extreme example, but some of you have heard a message like this in your life. Maybe it’s not come from your dad, but for some reason you’ve heard a subtle narrative that you don’t matter, or you don’t measure up, or nothing you do is good enough. In fact, it’s possible that the entire backdrop of your life has been this message. Whoever you are, whatever you’ve done, whatever anyone has ever said about you, you need to know that you are of immeasurable worth in the kingdom of God. As Ephesians says, you are Christ’s very workmanship, the crowning work of his hands, designed to make a lasting contribution that no one else can make. Rick Warren gets at the awe and purpose with which God has created us with the helpful acrostic: SHAPE

S stands for spiritual gifts, and if we’re a believer we all have them. These are supernatural endowments given to us when we invite Christ to come into our lives; and they’re for the purpose of encouraging God’s people, reaching the lost, building up the kingdom of God. Teaching, mercy, hospitality, all kinds of helps, knowledge, faith, healing, discernment…these are some of the gifts and fruits that God wants to bloom and blossom in your life.

H stands for Heart’s desire. That is to say we all have deep desires and longings that seem to be moving us in certain directions. Many of you came into the Navy because you sensed a very clear calling to serve your country. Many of you are here at Summer Seminar because you are perceiving a deep desire to serve your nation. If we are walking with the Lord, more often than not those desires are God’s very writing on our hearts. And this is so important to say because we often think that God’s about quenching our desires and sending us off to do something we’re certainly not going to want to do. Nothing could be further from the truth. Psalm 37:4 says, “Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.” This doesn’t just mean if we please God that he gives us what we want. Rather, on a deeper level, it means that if we are delighting in the Lord, walking with him on a daily basis, attune to his presence in our lives, he will literally place in us his very desires and thus, following him will be the greatest joy and adventure of our lives because it will burst forth from our own hearts and passions!
A signifies that we all have unique abilities. Whereas spiritual gifts are a result of faith, abilities are those skills you were born with: perhaps a bent toward engineering or math, athletic ability and physical prowess, high intelligence, the ability to speak and inspire others, creativity and art, singing, humor, the list goes on. It’s one of the great joys of life to see how God can take natural human abilities and use them for eternal purposes. A moving example of this in the story of the Olympic Sprinter, Eric Liddell from the 1920s who through his ability to run fast, gave great testimony to Christ. He was once asked why he liked to run so much. His answer: “When I run I feel God’s pleasure.” Seeing our abilities used for God’s glory brings great pleasure. Even our inabilities and weaknesses can be used by God – those aspects of our lives about which we feel the greatest insecurities, that bring us frustration, or always seem to hinder us. And we all have them – some you can see, some you can’t.

Stephen Ambrose tells the story of a Frenchman whose farm was taken over by the German army just before the allied invasion on June 6th, 1944. The Germans set up 4 well-hidden artillery batteries on the man’s farm, each positioned to fire on our troops should they hit the beach at Normandy. The farmer, unbeknownst to the Germans, was a member of the French resistance and so he began, with his son, to subtly calculate the paces between the guns and record their positions. His son, a little boy no more than 8-10, was blind; and because he was blind he had an incredible memory. He knew that farm by heart, every step of that land; he knew its terrain, its borders, the feel of its landmarks, the smell of the barn, the sound of the ocean as he got nearer the bluffs. But he was blind, and so the Germans paid no attention to him. What could a little insignificant blind boy do? Days before the invasion that little boy gathered up all he and his father knew about where those guns were, and having recorded every detail by memory, he walked into town and passed it on to members of the French resistance who then passed it to the allies in England. On the morning of June 6th, 1944, as our boys hit the beaches at Normandy, those guns were taken out and countless lives were saved because a little boy, fraught with weakness and inability, did what he could for the cause before him. It’s often through our most frustrating weaknesses that the greatest contributions are made. I think this is what the Apostle Paul was saying when he said, “For we have this treasure in earthen vessels that the surpassing power and greatness of God might be revealed in in.” (2 Corinthians 4:7)

P is Personality. We’ve all been given a unique personality; some of your personalities are more unique than others. Contrary to what you might believe, when we make the decision to step out and place our faith in Christ, he doesn’t overwhelm our personality or demand we change it. He redeems it, and begins to use it in all of its interesting, quirky, rough-edged manner. Take the Apostle Peter for example. Peter had the
personality of a bull in the china-shop. It seems that his life mantra was, “have thought-speak thought.” At times, he was overly emotional and given to self-aggrandizing statements. But what a transformation when Christ got ahold of him. His brash personality was still there, but now used to the glory of God. After the resurrection, it was Peter who jumped out of the boat and ran to his Master, having no regard for how it looked. And on the great day of Pentecost, it would be Peter who would stand and preach the gospel to the nations.

Finally, E – Experiences. We all have life-experiences which can be instrumental to others in the Kingdom of God. Our successes, our disappointments, even our failures are of inestimable worth to others as we show how God’s grace carried us through difficult times. The point is we all have a SHAPE that this world desperately needs. You see, God knew what he was doing when he created you. There is some great task in this world, some great labor that can only be accomplished by you. There is some great cause that will not be championed unless you step out in faith; some great injustice or evil that will be confronted only when you stand and are counted among God’s people. There may be a harvest of souls who will one day enter heaven because you heard Christ’s great appeal, and followed Him. And it’s an urgent appeal! It needs to be said that the kingdom of God will go on with or without you. This was certainly clear to Hobab - Moses and the children of Israel were going to the promised-land with or without him. And YES, Christ and his kingdom will come and go with or without you. But Jesus would much rather have you there, taking your part in that sacred task for which you alone have been fitted from the very foundations of the world.

In the end Hobab took his part and followed the children of Israel. We know this because later on in the book of Judges, listed among all those who finally settled in the promised-land, mention is made of a vast number of Hobab’s descendants, counted among God’s faithful, and made partakers of God’s inheritance and blessing…and all of this because one man heard God’s great appeal and offered his life in service to the kingdom of God. Brothers and sisters, if you will but step out and follow Christ today, and entrust yourself completely into his plans for you, generations to come will be blessed, and your life and my life, though imperfect, will reveal the surpassing power of Christ, “bringing many sons and daughters to glory.”

So please, come along! And go with us on this great adventure of following Jesus Christ!

They that have ears to hear, let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church, Amen.