

“Here I Am”
St. Paul’s UCC Church
February 6, 2022

Friends in Christ....

Last week we heard the story of Jeremiah being called by God to bring a message of doom and gloom about the coming of the powerful Assyrians. He was a reluctant prophet as he protested to God that he was only a lad. But God would not take no for an answer.

Today, we have two more stories about men being called. The Old Testament lesson is about Isaiah’s call to be a prophet. The Gospel lesson is about Peter’s call to follow Jesus. As you will hear, both are reluctant. In these cases, both claimed to be sinful persons and not worthy of the call. Again, God would not take no for an answer. In what must have been a scary vision, we turn to

Isaiah 6:1-13 (CEB) The Divine Throne Room

6 In the year of King Uzziah’s death, I saw the Lord sitting on a high and exalted throne, the edges of his robe filling the temple. ²Winged creatures were stationed around him. Each had six wings: with two they veiled their faces, with two their feet, and with two they flew about. ³They shouted to each other, saying:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of heavenly forces!

All the earth is filled with God’s glory!”

⁴The doorframe shook at the sound of their shouting, and the house was filled with smoke.

⁵I said, “Mourn for me; I am ruined! I am a man with unclean lips, and I live among a people with unclean lips. Yet I have seen the king, the LORD of heavenly forces!”

⁶Then one of the winged creatures flew to me, holding a glowing coal that he had taken from the altar with tongs. ⁷He touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips. Your guilt has departed, and your sin is removed.”

⁸Then I heard the Lord’s voice saying, “Whom should I send, and who will go for us?”

I said, “I am here; send me.”

⁹God said, “Go and say to this people:

Listen intently, but do not understand;

look carefully, but do not comprehend.

¹⁰Make the minds of this people dull.

Make their ears deaf and their eyes blind,

so they cannot see with their eyes

or hear with their ears,

or understand with their minds,

and turn, and be healed.”

¹¹I said, “How long, Lord?”

And God said, “Until cities lie ruined with no one living in them, until there are houses without people and the land is left devastated.” ¹²The LORD will send the people far away, and the land will be completely abandoned. ¹³Even if one-tenth remain there, they will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, which when it is cut down leaves a stump. Its stump is a holy seed.

The prophetic call begins with a death. The death of King Uzziah discloses that it was a traumatic time that Isaiah was called to perform his prophetic duties. This took place in approximately 742 BCE. The Judeans were facing a threatening encroachment from the Assyrian Empire, and it was not a promising time for God's people. At the time of Isaiah 6, the Assyrians were the most formidable army of all time with advanced weaponry, massive economic support, and a penchant for psychological warfare. They were well-known for their brutality. On the other hand, Jerusalem was a city with hastily erected defenses and filled with refugees from the countryside and other captured cities. It was not a good scene. It is easy to understand Isaiah's reluctance.

Isaiah's vision apparently takes place in "the temple", the innermost portion which was known as the "Holy of Holies" that housed the Ark of the Covenant. It was viewed as God's earthly throne. There Isaiah sees God's goodness as he stands in God's presence and God's heavenly council. Isaiah knew that he was a sinner and standing there he protests that he was not worthy. The image of the of the burning ember touching the lips to take away his guilt is very powerful. Filled with awe, after that he responds to God's question of whom shall I send with "Here I Am."

Bruce Epperly wrote: "The reading from Isaiah reminds us that the world is a turbulent and unsettling place. Even Isaiah is not immune; his time was one of great national grief and uncertainty, and he retreats to the temple to try and recover a sense of perspective and peace of mind. Although the passage does not tell us whether he is alone or in the midst of the worshiping congregation, Isaiah discovers firsthand the wisdom of Annie Dillard's counsel: when we go to church we should wear crash helmets, receive life preservers and be lashed to the pews in case God shows up. Isaiah experiences such a theophany, or encounter with the Holy One. He sees God's presence rock the temple and turn his whole world upside down. He catches a glimpse of the deepest reality: "The whole earth is full of God's glory."

A similar dynamic is at work in the calling of Peter. In the midst of failure, Jesus asks Peter to go deeper, not only into the waters but also into his experience of God's abundant and caring inspiration. Jesus presents Peter with the vision of a deeper realism that embraces his failed efforts as well as God's surprising and infinite bounty.

Awakened by the vision of a larger world, Isaiah and Peter confess their sinfulness and inadequacy. The issue is not primarily one of behavior or morality, but of awe and wonder before God and the surprising power of Jesus. As Psalm 8 proclaims: "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established, what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" Yet we are "crowned with glory and honor." Here now the calling of Peter and others:

Luke 5:1-11 (CEB) Jesus Calls Disciples

5 One day Jesus was standing beside Lake Gennesaret when the crowd pressed in around him to hear God's word. **2** Jesus saw two boats sitting by the lake. The fishermen had gone ashore and were washing their nets. **3** Jesus boarded one of the boats, the one that belonged to Simon, then asked him to row out a little distance from the shore. Jesus sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. **4** When he finished speaking to the crowds, he said to Simon, "Row out farther, into the deep water, and drop your nets for a catch."

⁵ Simon replied, “Master, we have worked hard all night and caught nothing. But because you say so, I will drop the nets.”

⁶ So they dropped the nets and their catch was so huge that their nets were splitting. ⁷ They signaled for their partners in the other boat to come and help them. They filled both boats so full that they were about to sink. ⁸ When Simon Peter saw the catch, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, “Leave me, Lord, for I am a sinner!” ⁹ Peter and those with him were overcome with amazement because of the number of fish they caught. ¹⁰ James and John, Zebedee’s sons, were Simon’s partners and they were amazed too.

Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid. From now on, you will be fishing for people.” ¹¹ As soon as they brought the boats to the shore, they left everything and followed Jesus.

May God bless our hearing of his Holy Word. Amen.

Think about it, Peter and his fishing partners had their most successful catch ever . . . and they walked away from it. What either has prompted you or will prompt you to abandon your job? higher pay? a better occupation? an improved location? a more congenial employer? all of the above?

Fishermen salt dried to preserve and then send a certain number of fish to Rome to the so-called owner of the lake as a rent payment. The Romans had claimed ownership of Israel and Judah. Fishing was a way to make a living in those days.

Luke notes that Peter (and of course his brother, Andrew) had a business partnership with another pair of brothers, James and John (Lk 5:10). They owned at least two boats (Lk 5:2).

To give us a little perspective on the catch, John Pilch, who was a biblical scholar, wrote: A boat discovered in 1986 close to shore at the Sea of Galilee was 26.5 feet long, 7.5 feet wide, and 4.5 feet high, with a rounded stern and a fine bow. (Carbon tests thus far date this boat to the period 140 B.C. to A.D. 40).

Physical anthropologists estimate that the average Galilean male of the Roman-Byzantine period stood about 5 feet 5 inches tall and weighed an average of 140 pounds. Fifteen such men would weigh just over a ton and could easily fit into this boat. That may help us picture the magnitude of the catch.

Jesus stepped into Peter’s boat (Lk 5:3) to address the crowd. Then he instructed Peter to go out in the deep water and drop the nets, and the rest is history.

Fish became a popular commodity in the Greek and Roman period, and it is reasonable to guess that this specific partnership flourished. What prompted them to “leave everything and follow Jesus” (Lk 5:11)? His invitation alone?

According to Luke, Jesus had moved from Nazareth to the fishing village of Capernaum so Peter would have heard him speak. Also, one of Jesus’ healing miracles was Peter’s mother-in-law. So, they would not have been strangers. It is likely that Peter would have heard Jesus speaking from the boat while he was cleaning the nets. So, when Jesus tells Peter to take his boat out into the deep and drop the nets, he must have wondered what did Jesus know about fishing. But he showed his trust in Jesus by obeying him.

Peter had been fishing all night with no success, then working from the early morning hours cleaning his nets. Most likely he was exhausted and looking forward to going home and getting some sleep. So, it must have seemed a bit of an imposition when Jesus got into Simon's boat and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Nevertheless, Simon did what Jesus had asked (5:1-3).

Luke does not tell us what Jesus taught the crowds that morning. The focus is on what follows. Jesus tells Simon to put out into the deep water and let down his nets for a catch. Simon obviously believes this will be a futile exercise. He is the professional fisherman, after all. We can almost hear the exasperation in his voice when he responds, "Master, we have worked all night but have caught nothing." But then he continues; "Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets" (5:4-5).

We know what happens next. Nets were so full of fish that they begin to break. Boats so full that they begin to sink. Then Jesus throws the punch line to Peter. "Do not be afraid. From now on, you will be fishing for people." And the rest is history.

Simon Peter's resistance to Jesus stemmed from his sense of unworthiness. He initially protests Jesus' instructions to go out into the deep waters and let down the nets because he is convinced that the fish are not biting. After all, they have worked all night and caught nothing. We can hardly blame him for his skepticism.

How often do we resist Jesus' claim on our lives because of what he is calling us to do seems too crazy, too impractical? How often do we avoid putting out into the deep waters of following and bearing witness to Jesus because we are convinced that we will not see any results? What might it mean for us to go deep-sea fishing with Jesus — to trust and to follow him outside our comfort zones, to let go of our certainties, to have our lives radically reoriented?

For most of us, this will not mean leaving our current professions behind (although we cannot rule out that possibility). We all are called by virtue of our baptism to participate in God's mission to the world in Jesus Christ. We all are called daily to reorient our priorities to align with God's priorities, to use the gifts God has given us in service to others, to share the good news of Christ in word and deed.

Jesus' mission does not wait until we think we are ready. The need for the gospel in this broken world is far too urgent. We are called right now — even in spite of our frailty, failures, and doubts, even in the midst of our ordinary, busy, complicated lives. Jesus' word to Simon Peter is also a word to us: "Do not be afraid." This is Jesus' mission, and we trust that he will keep working with us and through us, "catching" others as he has caught us — in the deep, wide net of God's mercy and love. We trust, finally, that the catch is in God's hands, and that God's desire is for the nets to be bursting and the boats full.

Thanks be to God. Amen.