

Pastor's Message – 2/9/25
Isaiah 6:1-8 (9-13)
Luke 5:1-11

On the Sundays since Jesus' birth at Christmas, and as Jesus has come into adulthood, we have been learning more and more about him, his life, activities, and his ministry. After his baptism in Judea and his temptation in the wilderness he "returned to Galilee," and began frequenting synagogues. He was in his home synagogue in Nazareth in Galilee during last week's reading when he escaped being thrown off the cliff and killed. From there he went to Capernaum, not very far away, he healed Simon's mother-in-law, presumably in Galilee, because Simon fished the Sea of Galilee/lake of Gennesaret. Luke calls the body of water where today's lesson takes place "the lake of Gennesaret." Gennesaret is a settlement on the west side of what other sources call the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus has been doing *a lot* of travelling. Just before today's lesson starts, Luke 4:44 reads, "So he continued proclaiming the message in the synagogue of Judea." Judea is pretty far from Galilee; it doesn't make sense that Jesus went from Galilee to Judea, then found himself back in Galilee on the lakefront, but that's where he is.

In the conversation within our Gospel text this week, we learn that it hadn't been a good night for Simon. Fishing was done at night in those days. The fishermen would spend the night in the shallows, tossing their nets and pulling in the catch. Then as dawn broke, they would bring the fish to shore and sell them at the market. Because of a lack of facilities for preserving fish, this was a daily event. Except this day.

This day, for Simon, was a hungry day. He had nothing to sell, nothing to take home for his family. Nothing. It might have been that he was still sitting in his boat because he didn't want to go home and tell his family that he had nothing. It might have been that he was sitting there feeling empty, worthless, and shallow—until that man came and asked him to go out into the deep.

"Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing," laments Simon. He sounds like he wants to stay close to shore, safe and comfortable because his time on the water hasn't yielded any fish. But Simon isn't going to be stubborn about this. "Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets," he offers. And he does (v. 5).

The result? Simon and his fellow fishermen catch so many fish that their nets are beginning to break. They call for their partners in the other boat to come and help, and they end up filling both boats to the point that they're beginning to sink (vv. 6-7).

Peter knew he was in over his head. "Go away from me," that's the first thing he thinks to say in the face of someone who lived so much more deeply than he did. "Go away, I can't handle it; I'm not good enough for it; I don't have the strength." Remember, Peter had been up all night, struggling with his failures. Don't you think that Peter would have said, "Thank you, Jesus"? Instead, do you remember what Peter said? "Go away from me, Jesus, for I am a sinful man." Why? Never are you more aware of your sinfulness, your impurity, or how far short you fall than when you stand before the holiness of God. Isaiah experienced this in the Temple. Peter experienced this on the beach.

The cry of unworthiness has been uttered by many Biblical messengers: Moses, who said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?"; Jeremiah, who complained, "Oh, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth"; and

Isaiah, who said, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips!" Wrapped in the sins of humanity, none of us seems good enough for God; yet in the loving light of Christ's forgiveness, we are all worthy. And so it is that Saul, one of the early church's worst enemies, could become Paul, one of Christianity's most faithful apostles. And it is Paul who reminds us that "through this man (Jesus) forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him, everyone that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses" (Acts 13:38-39).

Our Old Testament reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah begins today, "In the year that King Uzziah died." We might not mark such an event as a significant event in our lives. We might say, "That will be a day that lives in infamy" or on the day that President Kennedy was assassinated, or "in the year that the Space Shuttle exploded," or "in the months after George Floyd died," or "in the year when the pandemic struck" or it might be something more personal.

But, for Isaiah, his life-altering event happened "In the year that King Uzziah died." Uzziah started his reign at age 16 and ruled for 52 years. Think about that, 52 years. Fifty-two years ago, it was 1973. How many presidents have we had in that period of time? Richard Nixon was sworn in 1973. Then Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush, Clinton, Bush, Obama, Trump, Biden, and now Trump again. We've had ten presidents during the past 52 years. They had just one leader -- Uzziah.

While most kings following King David left much to be desired, Uzziah was a military genius who protected Jerusalem and developed cisterns for water. For 52 years, he was their anchor. And just as the evil empire of Assyria was marching south to conquer Israel, Uzziah died. There was a crisis in the land. Who will protect us? Who will lead us? Who will defend us? Who will be our king? Isaiah goes to the Temple and discovers that there is One who sits on the throne. The king's not dead. Oh, Uzziah is gone, but the true king of Israel is God Almighty.

Theologian RC Sproul points out that in Hebrew they have no bold face, no underline, no capital letters to make something stand out, to say that this is important. If something is important, it is repeated. Jesus says, "Truly, TRULY I say unto you..." That means pay attention! Only a handful of times is a word repeated. In the book of Revelation, the eagle in midair says, "Woe, Woe, Woe to the inhabitants of the earth." (That can't be good news.) And in Isaiah, we see this pattern only this time it points out an adjective describing the nature of God. And it is not that God is love, love, love or grace, grace, grace or nice, nice, nice. God is holy, holy, holy.

Some consider Isaiah 6 to reflect the prophet's initial calling by God; others see it as his commissioning to a special task within that ongoing call. In either case, Isaiah was at first profoundly overwhelmed with awe and terror as he experienced the holy, majestic presence of God. Isaiah's awareness of his unholy sin was exacerbated by being in the presence of the holiness of God. The first words out of his mouth (v. 5) were: "Woe is me! I am *lost* ..." — or "*destroyed*" (NET); "*doomed*" (NLT); or "*ruined*" (NIV). The reason Isaiah gives for his distress is that he is a man of unclean lips who lives among a people with unclean. He feels unqualified to praise God: "His lips (the instruments of praise) are 'unclean' because he has been contaminated by sin."

The second section of that reading, verses 13-19, further defines Isaiah's call as a fool's errand. God tells him, "Go and say to this people: Keep listening, but do not comprehend; Keep looking, but do not understand. (Isaiah 6:9)."

Isaiah's message is in one sense futile. He is told to prophesy to an uncomprehending people, one who either cannot or will not listen, respond, and change. When Isaiah asks how long he has to

deliver this message the reply is, "Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people and the land is utterly desolate." (6:11)

That's discouraging. And yet, though we know we may not totally eliminate hunger, end war, and begin God's reign of peace, we also know that we are to be about the Master's work for as long as we are able. If you can't feed everybody, feed this family. If you can't stop war, help resettle another family. If we are not living in the millennium right now, we can demonstrate what the peace of Jesus Christ will look like in the way we live our lives together as the church.

Because even this gloomy message is not without hope. Isaiah promises, after desolation and another wave of desolation passes over the land, there is still a stump standing when all is over, adding "(The holy seed is its stump.)" (6:13) And we know from the words of Jesus that the smallest of seeds, the mustard seed, which normally grows to be a bush, will in God's time become a tree of life, shelter, and healing.

I just finished reading a novel in which one of the characters experienced a great personal tragedy and, in response to the main character's encouragement to hold fast, stay firm, because the worst thing to happen to you might turn out to be the best thing to ever happen to you. She responds, "If that's God's plan, I don't want it."

Let me ask you this. When is the last time God dropped you on your knees? When is the last time you couldn't even look up? When is the last time you said, "Woe is me?" When is the last time that you said, "Holy, holy, holy -- Lord God Almighty."

Worship happens whenever human inadequacy is met by the grace of God. Worship happens whenever a grateful response answers a divine call. It is important to note that God's question, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" was not directed to Isaiah, but rather to the attending seraphim. Isaiah simply overheard the question and immediately stepped forward. One might want to question his sanity. After all, God did not say where the "whom" was being sent or what the task was. Isaiah might have waited until more information was forthcoming before he volunteered. What could have prompted such a seemingly rash response?

God does not reveal his radical presence simply to overwhelm us or to make us feel worthless. Rather, he wishes by that presence to remind us of his empowering grace that meets and transforms our awareness of personal inadequacy. No sooner had Isaiah confessed his own and his generation's uncleanness, than God impressed on him the grace that forgives sins. Indeed, in the text, we are led to understand that only because Isaiah was able to confess his inadequacy before God was God able to use him as a prophet to the people. For Isaiah, when human inadequacy was met by divine grace, worship happened.

Where then, shall we place our trust? Upon whom shall our confidence lie? The simple answer is God. But both Bible readings today challenge us to discover this in the same way that Isaiah and Peter did.

Through humility that drops us to our knees before the holiness of God.

Through honesty that names the place of our sin.

Through gratitude that receives the fire of forgiveness.

Through boldness that hands over our lives and say, "Come what may, I am yours. You are my God; I am your servant. I will trust you with my life. Here am I. Send me."

What if Jesus got into your boat?

What if Jesus was nosing into your business? What changes might take place? The effect on Peter was that he saw instantly his own sinfulness and unworthiness.

But, of course, this was only after Peter recognized that Jesus was the Son of God. It's quite possible, and even probable, that Jesus is already in our boat, but we really haven't recognized him. He works quietly. He hasn't done any flashy miracles like he did for Peter and friends.

If we look carefully, though, we might recognize the work of Jesus in opportunities that come to us in the form of interruptions or a friend or acquaintance who confides in you. It might have been Jesus giving us a chance to lift someone's spirit with a positive word or heal a wound with a loving gesture.

When Jesus gets into our boats, we will not only sense our unworthiness and have opportunities to "catch" some human "fish," but we will begin to understand our lives as miracles of grace! Peter and friends had so many fish; the boats started to sink. They were victims of their own success.

It was at this moment that Jesus was able to get them out of their boats and take them down the road, enrolling them in a three-year training and internship program, which, by the way, they all flunked.

Luke's description of a fish catch so big as to break nets, also strains the imagination. It is a fish story guaranteed to outweigh any other fish story one might encounter --or create. As a staple food of the Hebrew people in that area, fish figure in this scene as well as in the feeding of the four and five thousand. In each case, they show the unlimited generosity of God.

There is the story of a church which was broken into and robbed, but when the robbers opened the bank bag, they were no doubt disappointed: it contained only \$70,000 in pledge cards from the stewardship campaign.

Had they found cash in the bag, the situation would have been very different: the criminals would have made out like, well, bandits, and the church's ministries would have been severely affected. As it was, \$70,000 worth of commitment offered them nothing they could take to the bank.

To the church, though, \$70,000 worth of commitment was worth infinitely more than the cash. It's a promise of faith, a treasure that cannot be stolen.

Jesus says, "Let down your nets." Jesus didn't say, "First get yourself the latest and greatest fishing rod or the biggest boat or the fastest motor or the most technological fish-finder or the most up-to-date lures." Jesus' instruction simply means, "Use what you have." He said, "Use what you got, and let them down where the fish are. Then you will be successful."

Too many times, we think that to be true followers of Jesus, we need to have special training, special credentials, or special tools.

No. These guys are fishermen! They don't have anything fancy. They are using methods time-tested over centuries.

Jesus encourages us to use the tools we have.

Consecrate these tools to the Lord's service.

Even in the midst of our failures, even when we feel inadequate, it isn't really about us, it's about the power and the grace of God working in and around us. God promises the catch of fish, God promises the beginnings of grace, born every year at Christmas and in the hearts and minds and souls and words and actions of those who respond to God's call and put their trust in him.