

**The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany  
(The Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time)**

**Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 138; Luke 5:1-11; I Corinthians 15:1-11**

**Isaiah 6:1-8.** Isaiah is in the Temple, likely at the Holy of Holies (does this imply that Isaiah was a priest?). While participating in worship there, he has a vision of God in God's Temple (i.e., God's throne room), rather than in Solomon's Temple. His vision is awe-inspiring, thoroughly overwhelming to Isaiah. God is being worshipped by *seraphs* (angelic-like creatures) that are so awed by God's presence and holiness that they cover themselves in reverence and in modesty. They proclaim that God is holy, filling the entire earth with his glory. Their chant, "Holy, holy, holy" is the strongest use of superlatives – that is, nothing is as holy as God! The entire temple trembles at the presence of God, for his presence is the epitome of power and of holiness.

It is at this point that Isaiah cannot help but be drawn to the recognition that, next to God, he is an utter, thorough sinner. He can only respond, "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" (6:5). Compared to his fellow Israelites, Isaiah stands up reasonably well. But measured against the holiness of God, he is a thorough sinner, a man of "unclean lips". Furthermore, the people whom he represents are also thoroughly unclean. Sin is here seen by Isaiah as being both social and individual, a reality both for him and for the entire nation.

Picking up the theme of "unclean lips", a seraph flies to him, holding a live coal that he has taken from the smoking altar in front of Yahweh. With that coal, he sears Isaiah's lips, thus purging him of his sin.

It is only after Isaiah has become cognizant of his sins, confesses them and is purged of them – it is only then that God can now issue his call to Isaiah. "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us" (vs. 8a)? And the repentant Isaiah can now respond, "Here am I! Send me" (vs. 8b).

This passage, of course, is a message about call. An authentic call from God can come, Isaiah tells us, only out of the sense of God's holiness and love, the confession of our sinfulness and the receiving of divine forgiveness. A need does not constitute a call! Simply responding deeply to human need is not the essential ingredient of a call (although it can be a contributing factor). Authentic call comes out of our relationship with God and within a community of faith. It comes through the intersection of deep awareness of that human need to which one profoundly responds and an overwhelming sense of one's relationship with God in which our response to God's holiness prepares us to hear the words, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" That is why Frederick Buechner's definition of call is such a profound one: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet!"<sup>1</sup>

**Psalm 138** deals with both God's commitment to humanity and his expectation of our accountability. The Psalm begins with God's commitment to us all, but particularly to the "little ones" of the earth.

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1997), pp. 118-119.

“For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly; but the haughty he knows from afar” (138:6).

This is a most intriguing statement. The first thing the Psalmist declares is God’s commitment to the lowly, the “little ones” of society. God’s primary concern is for the expendables – the poor, the powerless, the widow and orphan, the aliens and the marginalized of both God’s kingdom (Israel) and of the whole world.

But the Psalmist continues, “but the haughty he knows from afar”. This is not what one who is knowledgeable about Hebrew poetry would expect the Psalmist to write. The logical and poetic statement that would have balanced the phrase “he regards the lowly” would be something like “but he takes no notice of the haughty” or “he rejects the haughty” – not “but the haughty he knows from afar”. Why would the Psalmist break the poetic order and construct of the sentence to write what he wrote?

To declare “the haughty he knows from afar” is for the Psalmist to declare that God still cares about the powerful and the wealthy. But they are kept by God at “arm’s length” from him, as he observes them from “across the room” or “on the horizon”. That is, God takes notice of the haughty and cares about them, but they are definitely “second-class” in God’s estimation. And they are “second class” precisely because of their exercise of power and their self-absorption. God is still concerned with them, but if they don’t repent and change their ways, he will not favor them!

The Psalmist then continues. His second emphasis is of God’s commitment and grace-filled love toward him and therefore, by extension, to any who respond faithfully to God’s choice and call of them.

“Though I walk in the midst of trouble, thou dost preserve my life” (vs. 7a).

“The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; thy steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of thy hands” (vs. 8).

The Psalmist isn’t suggesting an absence of trouble for those who faithfully respond to God’s choice and call. Rather, he is suggesting God’s calming, abiding presence in the midst of that trouble. Even in the midst of conflict or of difficulties, God is working his purposes out. God will bring about in his chosen what God has intended for us. So his love for us endures forever, and we will not be forsaken!

**Luke 5:1-11** is a profoundly rich story about call, far more rich than an initial reading of it would indicate. The story begins at the shore of the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus commandeers the boat of a fisherman by the name of Simon in order to teach the people gathered on the shore. Completing his teaching, Jesus commands Simon and his fishermen-companions (presumably James and John – vs. 10) to put out into the lake to catch fish. Simon and his companions had been unsuccessful in catching any fish the night before, but they accede to Jesus’ command, take two boats out into the lake and begin fishing. The result is an immense catch, with so many fish

that, as they pull in the nets, “both boats began to sink” (vs. 7). Simon, overwhelmed at the catch, falls down before Jesus and cries “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” But rather than leave them, Jesus responds to him and his companions, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people” (vs. 10). Then the story ends, “When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him” (vs. 11).

There are many important nuances in this story, to which we need to pay attention. First, although the focus of this story is on Peter, the story is not simply about the call of the big fishermen. It is about James and John as well, and the beginning of the formation of the disciple band.

Second, Jesus’ command to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch” (vs. 4), particularly in the light of the fact that these experienced fishermen had been unsuccessful in fishing the night before (vs. 5), is a call to faith. The question is whether these fishermen will obey Jesus or not. They are professionals in their field; Jesus is an amateur. Yet, they have seen a spirituality in Jesus that causes them to trust in him. Consequently, they “put out into the deep”. They take that next risky step of faith (even though they may look like fools), and venture forth on an impossible quest – something Jesus asks of all who follow him. And when they do, the result will be an amazing catch.

Third, the catch itself is of great importance. This story records a miracle that is far more striking than is apparent to today’s reader. Luke’s casual statement that these fishermen “were washing their nets” tells us that they were fishing with trammel nets. Trammel nets were made of linen, and consequently needed to be washed after each use. They were exceedingly effective and lightweight nets that would normally require two to four men to cast them from two boats. But they had two drawbacks: they had to be washed after each use. And they could be seen by the fish during the daytime. Therefore, if a professional fishing fleet used them, they were confined to nighttime fishing. But that’s the whole point of Luke giving us this information (which, of course, any first-century person would immediately recognize, but we would not). The professional fishermen could catch no fish at night (when the fish couldn’t see the nets). Jesus, through his call to Simon, James and John to fish, catches a great multitude of fish during the day (when the fish can see the nets). Taking the risk of “putting out into the deep” with Jesus, against all that makes sense, will mean great results!

Fourth, the miracle is so overwhelming that Simon falls at Jesus’ feet, confesses his sin, and is called by Jesus to begin “catching people” (vs. 10). Peter’s incredulity leads to service! The story is revealed to not so much be simply about taking risky steps of faith as it is about hearing and responding to God’s call to one about the purpose of his/her life. In this sequence, Jesus is calling into discipleship frightened and overwhelmed men. He has enabled them to make a significant profit in their business (see three paragraphs below). But now at the height of their success, he has called them to launch out into a new adventure and a new ministry – a ministry filled with uncertainty, great risk and potential danger. He calls them to a new work beyond anything they have ever imagined, and yet built upon their experience from the past (“from now on you will be catching people”). And as they are faced with such an overwhelming call that moves far beyond anything they could dream or even contemplate – more frightening than good news – Jesus says to them, “Do not be afraid!”

“Do not be afraid”. For, Simon, you are not in this alone. Jesus is at work in this situation. And Jesus will bring to pass through you what he has already designed your work to be. You must just do it – and the miracle will occur. So “do not be afraid”. Begin doing, and keep on doing what you have been called by Jesus to do – catching people for the kingdom. Live fully into this new call to you – live without timidity and fear. God will accomplish what God wants to do through you and this new ministry. And in that doing, you will find true fulfillment!

There is, incidentally, a pun in Jesus’ statement, “from now on you will be catching people”. Simon, James and John are called by Jesus to “catch people”. But the word Luke has Jesus use for “catch” has the sense to it either of “catch with a net and thus make dead” (when referring to fish) or “capture alive and spare life” (when referring to people).<sup>2</sup> Jesus is in essence saying to the three fishermen, “you will no longer catch dead fish in order to sell them at the market, but you will catch people, giving them true liberty in God”.

Fifth, Luke concludes the story with the words, “When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed Jesus” (vs. 11). This catch had been the most stupendous catch in the career of these three men as fishermen. They had made a “windfall” in this catch – the most money they had ever made. Yet Luke tells us that when Peter and his companions came ashore, they “left everything” in order to “follow Jesus”. *They didn’t sell these fish!* They didn’t turn their catch into the economic advantage it was affording them. There are significant economic, social and vocational implications here. These men leave behind everything of value (including their most recent financial windfall) in order to commit themselves to Jesus, the cause for which he stands (that is, the return of Israel to the shalom community and its Jubilee) and the community that he and they will begin building around themselves! They give up even their newly arrived-at wealth in order to follow Jesus.

It is intriguing to note the difference Luke draws between the response of Peter, James and John to Jesus (as examples of good discipleship) and the crowd. The crowds in Nazareth and Capernaum, delighted at Jesus’ miracle working, try to keep and use Jesus for their own purposes (Luke 4:42-44). Peter, on the other hand, obeys Jesus when told to “launch out into the deep”, declares his sinfulness and cries, “go away from me” for he sees great disparity between Jesus’ holiness and his own awareness of his own sinfulness. Further, the crowds simply stand “amazed” at Jesus (4:22), while the disciples are willing to “leave everything” in order to follow him. The people essentially want to use Jesus for their own good, while the disciples are willing to commit themselves to him, whether it results in their good or not!

Finally, examination of this scripture can’t be concluded without noting the striking parallels between this story of call and that of the prophet Isaiah. The two stories parallel each other so closely; one wonders whether Luke was using the story of Isaiah’s temple meeting with God as a template for his telling of this story of Peter’s call.

Both stories begin with an “epiphany”. Isaiah sees God “high and lofty, filling the temple”, the seraphs proclaiming, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts’ (Isa. 6:1-4). Peter hears Jesus’

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<sup>2</sup> Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI.; William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1997), pp. 234-235.

command to put out into the deep, and beholds the largest catch of fish he has ever seen when no fish should be caught (Luke 5:4-7). He thus realizes that this Jesus is no ordinary individual!

Isaiah, witnessing God's holiness, cries out "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 Lord of hosts" (6:5). Peter, witnessing Jesus' miraculous power, cries out "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man" (5:8). The response of both men to God's (Jesus') majesty is confession of sin and repentance.

God then reassures Isaiah with the words, "Your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out" (6:7), granting him forgiveness. Jesus then reassures Peter with the words, "Do not be afraid" (5:10), letting him know that his sinfulness does not keep Peter from being used by Jesus.

Finally, God then calls Isaiah to follow him. "Whom shall I send, and who will go for me?" When Isaiah accepts that call, God then declares, "Go and proclaim to the people" and gives him God's message (6:8-10). Jesus calls Peter, James and John to follow him with the words, "From now on you will be catching people" (5:10). And both Isaiah and the three embrace God's call and follow their Lord!

**I Corinthians 15:1-11** is the opening of a larger section of that book (15:1-58) dealing with Jesus' resurrection. It was obviously written by Paul to counteract those in and outside the Corinthian Church who were denying the resurrection. In essence what Paul is arguing is that one cannot deny the resurrection and still be a Christian (the meaning of "unless you have come to believe in vain" in vs. 2b).

Paul begins his argument for the resurrection in an unusual way. He doesn't begin it either with logical argument or biblical exposition. Rather, he begins it with personal testimony.

Reminding them of the faith that had been proclaimed to them, that they embrace, and that now help shape their lives and mission (15:1-2), Paul summarizes what they have been taught. "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures" (15:3-4).

Paul then moves from confession of faith to an appeal to provable fact. He tells the reader that the resurrected Jesus first appeared to Peter, then to the twelve disciples, then to 500 believers, then to James (Jesus' brother and the titular head of the church), then to all the "apostles" (not the twelve disciples – because Paul has already referred to them – but to those additional people recognized by the church as having apostolic or foundational ministries, viz. I Cor. 1:1; Acts 14:14), then "as if to one untimely born, he appeared to me" (Paul). The reason why Paul provides this proof is that all these people were eyewitnesses that Jesus was alive. They had each seen Jesus "face to face", and most had touched him and talked with him. Because most of them were still alive (vs. 6), anyone could talk with any of them and corroborate that each had met with the resurrected Jesus. Further, because there have been so many people who have been with the resurrected Jesus (approximately 525 people) and at different times, Jesus' resurrection can't be explained away as mere hallucination, wishful thinking or mass hysteria. Paul rests his

case in the integrity of people rather than the logic of argument (although he uses logic later on in this matter).

At this point, and because he has been under such relentless attack from the “parties” of the Corinthian Church, Paul can’t resist the temptation to briefly divert from his argument to a little self-defense. He makes a deprecating remark about himself (“one untimely born”) to point out that he, as an apostle, has been the last to meet with the resurrected Jesus face-to-face (Acts 9:1-9). In one sense, Paul states, he doesn’t deserve to be considered an apostle “because I persecuted the church of God” (vs. 9). But in another sense, he does deserve to be so considered because God’s mercy and forgiveness have been given to him, he has been called by God to be an apostle, and he has taken his apostleship more seriously than has any other apostle for “I worked harder than any of them” (vs. 10).

But then Paul suddenly recognizes that he has diverted from his argument (thus lessening its impact) and quickly reverses himself. He reminds both his readers and himself that God doesn’t reward hard labor but whether we embrace God’s grace, and then returns to his resurrection argument, “Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim Jesus’ resurrection and so you have come to believe” (15:11).

Paul has presented a strong argument here by reminding the church of the large number of eyewitnesses who saw, met and talked with the resurrected Christ. Yes, it is against all logic to believe that someone has risen from the dead. But the facts are otherwise, Paul argues. To deny Jesus’ resurrection, you have to deny the fact that 525 people can testify to their actually being with an alive Jesus *after* his proven death. Because there are too many eyewitnesses to argue hallucination, and because Jesus’ appearance was over a number of years and at too many occasions to argue mass hysteria, the only conclusion one can fairly come to is that Jesus is indeed risen from the dead. Both Roman and Jewish courts require two eyewitnesses to corroborate a claim; the church has 525 eyewitnesses!

In a sense, what Paul has written here moves beyond an argument for the resurrection to a recital of faith. It is a proclamation of what the Church holds most dear. It is, in its way, a confession of faith. And therefore, it is also a statement of call. These 525 eyewitnesses didn’t just happen to be standing idly around, having nothing better to do with their time. They had been selected beforehand by God to be eyewitnesses of their Savior’s resurrection. This was, in part, why they had been both born and reborn – to be able to give witness to Jesus’ resurrection. So, Paul declares, even though his mission has been to be the apostle of the Church to the Gentiles and plant churches throughout the Mediterranean world, in a very real sense, Paul had been called by God, and as one who was not a believer but rather a persecutor of the church, to meet Jesus on the road to Damascus, and thus change the world through the One who changed his world!

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