

## **Fifth Sunday after Epiphany February 10, 2019**

### **Isaiah 6:1-8, 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, Luke 5:1-11**

Let me tell you a story about a young man, raised in normal circumstances. Did well in school, got married, was living an average, everyday life. Then it all changed. He went to sleep one night and had a dream. A dream that seemed as real to him as any experience. When he woke up, his life was changed. He quit his job and became a social activist. He worked and lived among the poor, the widows and orphans, those who were not in the 1%. He was vocal in his support for policies which sought to encourage a sharing of this wealth with those who had less. He didn't have much success, not in his lifetime. But then again, he'd been promised that he wouldn't.

Let me tell you a story about an up and comer. A young man who had been raised to do the job. Who had all the advantages you could ever wish for and who took advantage of them. He was raised by a family of more than modest means. Went to all the best schools and graduated at the top of his class. He was smart as a whip and energetic in promoting the agenda of his company. As a young executive he was hands on. Working in the field. When challenges to the company arose, he was the first in line to meet them....head on.

He knew the mission of his organization and was ruthless in pursuing that goal. Until one day, when he was on a business trip out of town. From out of nowhere he had a flash of insight. In that moment, he saw to his dismay that the organization he worked for, he'd committed his life to, had it all wrong. Was pursuing the wrong mission. That the upstart group he had been most recently

trying to quash actually had it right. That their mission was the one he should be pursuing. Overwhelmed, he sought out one of their affiliates in the town where he was headed. Soon, he had quit his old job and taken up one with this small but growing organization. He pursued the mission of that new group until the end of his life, helping to grow them into one of the largest and most successful organizations in the world.

Let me tell you a story about a young man. Raised in a blue-collar family in a middling sized town. He followed in the footsteps of his father, working with his hands but owning the means for his own livelihood. He got married young and worked hard every day. One day, after a long and unsuccessful night shift, an acquaintance of his showed up asking for a ride. He knew this guy some. He'd helped out with his mother-in-law when she was sick and was known as a guy who knew something and who liked people, liked helping them out. So he took him for a ride. Now, when the guy suggested he go back to work and try one more time and gave him a pointer on how to maybe get a different result, he almost busted out laughing. But, he gave it a try. He was a good guy after all. And it worked. It worked so well he decided following this guy was a better bet than working for himself. So, he left his small business and followed him. The years ahead were tough for him and his family. He didn't make much money, but the intangible rewards were more than enough to make up for it.

Let me tell you a story about a guy from a middle-class family. He went to college, did pretty well, but in grad school followed a passion of his, totally different from his college degree. While he was encouraged many times to go into upper management, he was just as happy to stay in middle management.

And he did that for a lot of years. Enjoyed his job. But finally, after some major changes in his life, after taking a good look at himself, he made a change. He went back to school, which was hard on his wife and family, took that job in upper management. It wasn't easy but the end result has been pretty good so far.

Would you be surprised if I told you these were the stories of Isaiah, Paul, Peter, and myself?

We don't know much about Isaiah and his life. But it's pretty certain that he would have some education, maybe come from a family with some wealth, or part of the priestly caste. What we know is that one night he had a vision. A vision where he was in the Temple, in the very presence of God. And in that moment he became aware of just how small he was next to God. His mind couldn't process it other than to see that God was so much bigger than him that just the hem of God's robe filled the temple.

He tucked himself away in a corner, seeing himself for truly who he was, aware of his own sinfulness, his unworthiness to be this close to God, creator of all things. Who was so holy, and just, and powerful. And then, the seraph, one of the fiery winged attendants to God took a stone from the altar...glowing red hot... and touched it to his lips. And it proclaimed that now, his sin had been blotted out, as if it had never been. That now, his guilt had been sent away. It changed him.

As his mind swirled at this abrupt change in his self-understanding the voice of God spoke, "Whom shall I send. Who will go for us?" and almost before he knew it, Isaiah answered the call, "Here I am! Send me." What followed was a difficult life. One that was filled with challenges, with a lot of tilting at windmills, calling the people of Judea to repent of their ways. To remember the care of the poor;

widows and orphans. To remember the least of these in society, or that society would fall. To call them again to follow the path God had laid out for them as a nation.

Paul started his life as Saul. A Jew, a Roman citizen, part of the educated elite. He learned all there was to know about Judaism; the Hebrew Bible, the Mishnah. He became first among the enforcers of orthodoxy, especially in regards to this upstart sect within Judaism, the followers of Jesus. He worked hard to stamp out this threat and was even present when one of its adherents was stoned to death.

He was riding high. Sure to go far in leadership. Then, on the road to Damascus, in a flash of light, Jesus appeared to him. Blinded by this encounter, Jesus sent him to Ananias, a believer in Damascus who the Lord appeared to, who warned him that Saul would come to learn. So that Saul might go and proclaim Jesus to the Gentiles.

Transformed by this encounter with the risen Christ. By the grace God had shown in choosing Saul, a persecutor of the church to go and proclaim, he changed his name to Paul. Left behind his promising career and embarked on one that was filled with jail time, narrow escapes, and the joy of starting and fostering the growth of many of the first congregations throughout the Mediterranean.

Peter was all set for a life he probably knew how it was going to go. Married young, working hard as a fisherman. Things would generally work out okay. A life well lived, but nothing spectacular.

Then Jesus comes along. He knew him, Jesus had spent time with him...had even healed his mother-in-law (now that earned Peter some brownie points!).

So when Jesus just commandeered his boat, so that he wouldn't get squeezed like a lemon while he was teaching, he went along, even though he was dog tired from an unsuccessful night of fishing. When Jesus told him to put down his nets. Peter let him know, hey, we've worked hard all night with nothing to show for it. But, okay. Since you say so.

And in that miraculous catch that follows, Peter suddenly realizes he doesn't know Jesus. He sees in him a glimpse of the divine, enough to know to be frightened. Frightened because he knows what kind of man he is, "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man."

The response of Jesus to this confession is instructive. He doesn't say, I forgive your sins. Rather, he gives comfort, "Do not be afraid." An echo of the angels to the shepherds in that field on Christmas Eve. An echo of the angel to Mary and to Zechariah. Do not be afraid. It's okay. I know who you are, and I choose you. I blot out your sin, I send away your guilt. And I give you a calling suitable for you. You've caught fish. Now, you will catch people.

I started life like anyone else. Dad was a CPA, mom a homemaker and then Counselor. Got good grades in school. We were active in church, went every Sunday (8:30 am service), leader in youth group. I played football in High School and studied theater in college.

Then I went to Seminary, to become what is now called a Deacon and at the time was called an Associate in Ministry. I had been told I should be a pastor, but I never saw myself as someone with those gifts. The idea frightened me. Middle management was where I was comfortable.

Then, the call changed. I kept hearing about the shortage of pastors. The need for those who would follow that path. I heard in those moments the voice of God, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”

Like these other call stories, mine also meant taking a good look at myself, cleared eyed, with no illusions. A look I don’t know that I could have imagined earlier in my life. I knew doggone well that I was not good enough to be a pastor. I knew that I was far from perfect. That I was indeed a sinful man. But I also knew that God could work with that. And so, with fear and trembling, I said, “Here I am, send me”.

These stories are not unique to Isaiah, Paul, Peter, or me. They are your story. All of us have this experience. An encounter with God that reveals to us the truth about ourselves. Receiving an absolution from God, a blotting out, being told not to be afraid. And then a call, a task, a mission for our lives.

Most of us won’t recall this moment. We were young when it happened. But in these waters of baptism, we too encountered the reality of who we are, sinful people. In these waters we received both the forgiveness and grace of Isaiah and Paul, and the reassurance of Peter, Do not be afraid. I know who you are, and I choose you.

And we received our call; to live life in community with other believers. To hear God’s Word and share in the Lord’s Supper. To share the Good News of God in Jesus Christ in all we say and do in our lives- at home and away, when we are at work and when we are alone. To serve others in the same way Jesus served us, unselfishly. To strive for God’s justice and to bring peace to the whole world. To join our story with that of God and God’s pursuit of God’s people.

We don't recall this event; but it is one that is, hopefully, recalled to us each day. One that daily tells us the truth about ourselves.

That we are sinners.

That we are forgiven by God.

That we are chosen and called into a ministry that is as unique to us as our fingerprints. As simple as raising our children in the faith. Of advocating for the widows and orphans, the least of these in our society. Of living fully as part of this community of faith. As difficult as stepping up to serve in leadership of this assembly, on council, on a committee. Of answering the call to rostered leadership; as a Pastor or Deacon.

These stories are your stories. And your story is not yet done. So, I invite you today to look again at yourself with honest eyes. Confess the reality of your own sin. And hear the words of Jesus, I know who you are, and I choose you. I blot out your sin, I send away your guilt. And I give you a calling suitable for you. Come, follow me. And I will make you fish, for people.