

5 Epiphany Yr C, 6/02/2022
Isa 6:1-8; Lk 5:1-11
Pastor Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson

“God’s holiness, sinfulness, and the call”

A distraught lady called the police station and went on for several minutes about her missing dog, Fifi. Finally, the police officer said, “I’m sure Fifi’s smart and will find her way home.” The lady said, “Oh, yes, she’s the smartest dog in the whole world., as smart as any person.” The policeman replied, “Then, you better hang up the phone; Fifi’s probably trying to call you.”

God is trying to call us. We should hang up the phone of other priorities and listen for God. God calls each one of us, unfortunately we do not always listen, or believe that God calls us, or we fill our life with many distractions and other priorities.

In today’s passage from Isaiah, as well as in our gospel, there are similarities in the way God calls Isaiah and Simon Peter. Both Isaiah and Peter experience the holiness of God. God’s holiness makes them realise their sinfulness, their unworthiness. However, both are given the assurance that they are forgiven and that God has called them.

In the case of Isaiah, he is worshipping in the temple when God appears to him in a vision. He claims to actually have seen the LORD God and the seraphim for a moment, then all he sees is the hem of God’s robe, which fills the temple. His immediate response to seeing and experiencing the holiness of God is a deep sense of sinfulness, dread, fear, unworthiness. God’s holiness made it impossible for Isaiah, or for anyone, to hide their sinfulness. All of those things in life that one regrets, feels guilty or shameful about, one’s mistakes and failures, one’s lack of holiness or righteousness, and so on. Therefore Isaiah responds by saying: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.” Or as *The Message* puts it: ““Doom! It’s Doomsday! I’m as good as dead! Every word I’ve ever spoken is tainted—blasphemous even! And the people I live with talk the same way, using words that corrupt and desecrate.”

It is after Isaiah's lips are made clean; after the seraph takes a coal from the altar and touched Isaiah's mouth; after he is forgiven that he is then ready to hear God's voice speaking: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Isaiah responds to the LORD's question by saying: "Here am I; send me!" He is now a called prophet of God and given the authority to speak God's word to his people. Notice that all of this—the necessary purification, the forgiveness and the call itself; as well as the entire vision do not come from Isaiah himself. No! All of them come from the Divine Initiative. It is God who does all of this for Isaiah. Only after God does all of this, then Isaiah responds and acts by answering God's call and going out to preach and practice God's word among his people.

A similar process is described in today's gospel. After Jesus preached to the crowds, he tells Simon-Peter to take the boat out into deep water and let down his nets for a catch. Peter, who has just been skunked, having caught no fish, and likely tired, is at first doubtful that they'll catch any fish now. However, he does do as Jesus tells him. The nets are let down, lo and behold, they catch so many fish that the other fishing partners come to help, and two boats are so full of fish that they began to sink.

Here is a bit of an aside about the fish, and about the Sea of Galilee, the name Gennesaret, is just another name describing the same lake. The lake is 13 miles long, and it is 8 miles at its widest, and in the shape of a harp. One scholar, (Mendel Nun, *The Sea of Galilee and Its Fishermen in the New Testament*), says there are 18 species of indigenous fish in the Sea of Galilee, and that 10 of those are important commercially. The edible fish are classified as follows: Musht, which includes the popular *Tilapia Galilea*, commonly called St. Peter's fish. Biny (Barbels), consists of 3 species of the Carp family, including the *Barbus longiceps* and the *Barbus Canis*. Both are used by Jews for Sabbath meals and feasts. *Kinneret Sardine*, at the height of the fishing season, tens of thousands of sardines are caught every night. In New Testament times these fish were preserved by pickling. Another scholar, (Mary K. Milne, in an article on the Sea of Galilee in *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, p. 330), says that some 40 different species of fish inhabit the Sea of Galilee, and salted fish were

exported widely throughout the Roman Empire. Fishing is still an important occupation there today.

Back to our gospel now. Notice how Peter responded to Jesus after the nets were full of fish, and the two boats almost sinking because they were so overloaded with the fish. He was not so much responding to the miracle catch as he was responding to Jesus himself. He realised Jesus' holiness, he was the Messiah, the God-Man. Like Isaiah, he said something similar, aware of his sinfulness and unworthiness, and in humility he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying: "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Or as *The Message* renders it: "Master, leave. I'm a sinner and can't handle this holiness. Leave me to myself."

However Jesus does not go away or leave Peter to himself. Rather, Jesus calls Peter, telling him: "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." Or as *The Message* puts it: "There is nothing to fear. From now on you'll be fishing for men and women." Like Isaiah, Peter's life was not the same, he and the other fishing partners left everything and followed Jesus.

Just as there were so many fish in the net, and most likely there were a variety of shapes, sizes, and different species—so too God fishes for people, calls people into the church, many people, people of different shapes, sizes, skin colours, and backgrounds. God calls people like you and I, just like he called Isaiah and Peter. Like Isaiah and Peter, in the face of God's holiness, we too realise our sinfulness and unworthiness. Who me? You must be mistaken or joking LORD! I cannot answer your call. I am inadequate, look at my background. I'm not qualified. I don't have any gifts.

When you read the Bible, you discover that God often calls the most unlikely people. People like you and I, who may believe that they lack the gifts necessary to answer God's call. Many of you might ask, "What can God do with me? I'm too old." Is that so? Look at Abraham and Sarah. They were not young when they left their homeland and went where God led them. You remember that they waited, and waited, and waited some more before Isaac was born. Old Abe was 100, and Sarah was 90. So, in light of that, I don't think you're too old!

God can still work through you to catch people. God can and does give you gifts to share in the church and in the world. Just as God needed prophets like Isaiah, and apostles like Peter—so God needs people like you to look after the church property, read the lessons on Sunday, prepare the bulletins, usher, prepare the Lord's Supper, serve coffee, serve on council, pray for, phone and visit one another, attend Bible studies, invite your friends, neighbours and family to church, help those in need, reach out to strangers, and so on and so forth. You can and do make a difference. For that, thanks be to God!