

Epiphany 5C
February 7, 2010

St. Andrew's

Isaiah 6.1-8 (9-13)
Ps 138
1 Corinthians 15.1-11
Luke 5.1-11

This passage from Isaiah 6 is, as you might imagine, one that is suggested by the Prayer Book and often chosen as a reading for ordinations: Here I am; send me. And when I was ordained a priest, I did, indeed, select this passage. I asked family and friends to be lectors and our son, Brian, read this particular lesson. Brian hadn't done much public speaking and even less in church and less at the lectern with the church full of people and the bishop and visiting clergy. I'd sent the lesson to him in advance, but you know how that goes. Even when you practice, the strain of the occasion can make strange and unusual things happen. And so it did. Brian read: Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs...

We all wanted to burst out laughing, but didn't, what with the reverence of the day, and Brian just kept on reading. I wondered at the time if he realized what he'd just said, and he had, of course! It does create quite a different image, doesn't it? Seraphs, God so awesome that only the hem of a garment filled the temple, and a pair of tongs. People my age think of them as what are now called flip flops, and younger people think of something else entirely!

But you know, I have to think that God would approve. We've seen evidence of God's sense of humor. And although I'm not sure that Brian stumbled over his words because he knew he was in the presence of the holy transcendent God, being in the presence of the divine, the unknowable, the one for whom words are inadequate could cause all nature of things to transpire.

Isaiah and Paul and Simon Peter are all struck by a sense of their unworthiness when they glimpse the power and majesty of God. They may have stumbled over their words as well. Fred Craddock writes that Isaiah has a theophany, a vision of God when the pivots of the thresholds of the temple shook and the Lord was sitting on a high and lofty throne, and blurts out that he is a man of unclean lips, unworthy to see even the hem of God's robe. Being in the presence of the great high God would tend to highlight the distance we feel from the one who created us. Tongs or tongs; it wouldn't seem to make much difference at that moment. Nevertheless, Isaiah is sent to preach.

Paul sees the risen Lord and realizes he is unfit to be called an apostle because he persecuted the church, but by God's grace can work harder than any of the others. Simon Peter gets a glimpse of the power and knowledge of Jesus, falls before him in the profound grip of his own sinfulness, but even so, is called by Christ to become a new kind of fisherman.

Our weaknesses, our failings, our sins, do not disqualify us from discipleship. They do point out for us that we are not God, and we need those reminders on a regular basis. And we need the emphasis on the sacred and awesome nature of God in a Christian culture that too often "domesticates" God, in service to self-fulfillment, writes James Davis. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord

of hosts, the whole earth is full of God's glory; a central message in our worship of prayer and song.

Luke is only beginning to introduce us to Simon Peter in his gospel and I can imagine Peter, tired from a night of fruitless fishing, hauling in dripping, heavy and empty nets, washing and preparing them for another evening, perhaps physically and emotionally spent from the work of the night and the lack of return for their efforts, despite the knowledge and skill of experienced fishermen. Perhaps he rolls his eyes when Jesus tells him to try again; perhaps there is exasperation in his voice as he says to his friends, "fine, alright, let's humor him. Then we'll go home and get some sleep."

But Peter does let down the nets again because in Luke's gospel, Jesus is well into his ministry at this point. This call comes after Jesus' ministry in Nazareth, an exorcism in a synagogue in Capernaum, healings including Peter's mother-in-law, and preaching that the scripture is being fulfilled. The disciples respond to a Jesus who has demonstrated power to which they are witnesses. Craddock continues that they follow a transcendent and compelling Christ in Luke, not a new preacher of an approaching kingdom, as in Mark and Matthew. It was enough to have sent the nets back down and the miracle of the catch was enough to send Peter to his knees.

David Ostendorf wrote again this week that it slowly became clearer to the disciples that the man with whom they were walking and talking was indeed the son of the God who created the world, who was the God of Abraham and Sarah and Esther and Isaiah. This God had become flesh and was now leading them away from their boats. Not only were they to do the catching, but they themselves had been caught. Jesus had cast out the net and they had been caught.

They are going to resist, just like Isaiah and Paul resisted. The lectionary gives us some additional verses of Isaiah for today which were not read, but they are listed in your bulletin and you can look them up. They are the tough verses where God tells Isaiah that being a prophet is going to be an awful job, that the people will not be allowed to repent, judgment is coming and it's going to get bad before it gets better. We resist too, and God rarely asks us to respond in such a terrifying way. Yet the profound and significant experiences of God are not to be found in the safe ways and safe places.

In order to bring in the miraculous catch, the net has to be thrown out even when it doesn't seem to make any sense. Howard Gregory believes that the invitation to put out into the deep for a catch provides a sharp contrast to our human penchant for the predictable and the routine. It is an invitation to venture into new ground and new depths and to respond to new challenges in mission and ministry for the church. We are challenged to respond to the urgings of God breaking into our human lives with tongs and thongs. Jesus calls us out into the deep, where we come face to face with who God is and who we aren't.

When we throw out the nets, we ourselves will be caught as well; held in the grasp of the one whose glory fills heaven and earth. God calls, sometimes suddenly, while we're engaged in normal everyday activity, and beckons us to be caught, grasped by the divine presence who demands our decision: stay behind or follow on a path of transformation.

The vestry just spent ½ their weekend in retreat and we talked about transformation and about casting out our net even though we didn't name it such at the time. We discerned and talked and

prayed about how and where God might be asking us to toss the nets from St. Andrew's. You'll be involved in more of that soon. Staying behind is not an option.

The first disciples as well as the prophets were ordinary people who came into contact with the extraordinary power of God and Jesus. They needed time to grasp this radical experience. King Oehmig has written that the truth had to be allowed to dazzle them gradually. And so their, and our, lessons began in the most ordinary of scenarios; their own workplace, among nets and fish, among Super Bowl and childcare, recycling and Scouting.

Jesus' intent was that they would simply follow him. Oehmig continues that in reading the Gospels, it is hard to find a place where Jesus tells listeners to "praise me." Not once did he ask people to "adore me" or to "venerate me." Yet it is plain that in his earthly life, Jesus summoned many to "follow me." The disciples have witnessed the transcendent power of God in his words and touch and they have been grasped by the experience. They get to their feet and commit to spreading the "epiphany" of what they have seen and heard.

We are close to concluding this season of Epiphany – one more week - when we have been reading and learning and experiencing the presence of God revealed in the human life of Jesus. In 10 days we'll enter Lent, a time well suited for casting our own nets into the deep, for witnessing in scripture as well as our own lives the miracles of Christ's presence which bring us to our knees in repentance, and for allowing ourselves to be caught, grasped and held in God's net filled to bursting with forgiveness and love.

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