

February 8, 2004
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
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The Call of God: Part II

Psalm 138 *The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me....*

Isaiah 6:1-8 *Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"*

Luke 5:1-11 *Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.*

The life of faith is a life of being open and responding to God's call. God calls us to lives of meaning and purpose. Our two readings this morning open up for us important dimensions of a life lived by God's call. There is the call of Isaiah to be God's prophet, God's spokesperson, in the decades before the Exile. And there is Jesus' call that results in the first disciples leaving everything and following him. What can we glean from these stories to help us deepen our lives as those who live by the call of God in Christ?

First, in both stories the would-be prophet and disciples are awakened to the sacred dimension of life. Isaiah is hanging around the temple and suddenly experiences the very presence of God. The heavenly beings and their song of God's holiness amplify Isaiah's experience of the sacredness that is at the heart of life.

The fishermen are going about their daily lives and work. Jesus borrows Simon's boat so that he can teach the crowd without being crushed. After teaching, he tells Peter to let down his nets on the other side of the boat. Peter protests that he and the others had worked all night with nothing to show for it. But because Jesus says so, he will do it. Trusting Jesus' word, Peter is willing to make one more effort.

Peter then catches so many fish that he can't handle it by himself. Even when they all pull together, the fishermen can't manage the sudden outpouring of abundance. Through Jesus they experience the very presence of God who made the fish and the seas, the world and all its abundance.

I don't think we can be about a called life unless we open ourselves to the sacred dimension of life. When we begin to hear and live the truth of the seraphim's song, we are on our way toward the life of call: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of God's glory." The life of faith and responding to God's call begins with awe and wonder. Aware of the sacredness of life, we are spiritually positioned to place our lives in the service of life, to live as those who know that the earth is full of God's glory and abundance.

The second point common to these stories is that the would-be prophet and disciples respond in humility. In his vision of God's glory, Isaiah sees how far he is from the sacredness of life. And he identifies with all people, knowing that he is as guilty as anyone else of living in ways that offend the sanctity of life. "Unclean lips" is language of pollution, the pollution of speech and living. Isaiah's vision of God does not make him "holier than thou." He sees that he is part of the polluting of life.

Simon sees the overflowing abundance and the nearness of God in Jesus. He collapses in the bottom of the boat, begging Jesus to go away. He is overcome by his

smallness, his insignificance, his lack of faith, his sinfulness—all that stuff we might feel when we glimpse the sacredness of life, including our own lives, and how far we have drifted from it.

But Jesus doesn't allow Simon to wallow in spiritual depression. "Do not fear," commands Jesus. Leave your fears behind. And what is God's response to Isaiah's spiritual agony? God sends one of the seraphs to take a coal from the altar and, in a symbolic act of cleansing, to touch Isaiah's lips. "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." God deals swiftly with sin and guilt, and our tendencies to wallow in both. They are removed, done away with. God wants to bring us to the main thing--being those through whom God can touch and heal the world.

Despite conflicting images we get sometimes in the Bible, God does not want to wipe us out and take out divine rage on us because of our sins. God is the God of grace, yes, in both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. God is interested in lifting us up, appointing and anointing us, touching our lips so that we speak and live the truth about life and its sacredness. God wants to send us out so that how we live and what we do and say "catches" others, that is, brings them life. If we are still caught up on our "state of sinfulness," hung up on our deficiencies and inadequacies, groaning over how imperfect we are, then we are not really listening to God. We are not allowing ourselves to encounter the God who is at the heart of life, the God who seeks to reveal to us life's sacredness and abundance, and to call us into it. God is seeking our own salvation, to rescue us from futility, and bring us to awareness of life's abundance. Then we can become persons and a community that can "catch" others, that is, offer others the same salvation, the same healing of life, the same wholeness that comes from knowing and living the sacredness of their lives and all of life.

A third commonality in the stories is this: **God's call is to be responded to out of complete freedom.** Notice what really happens in the stories. After Isaiah's lips are cleansed, God, as though speaking to the heavenly council, says, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" God isn't speaking directly to Isaiah. Isaiah overhears this call, God's need for someone to do something. And now that he has been lifted up by God's grace and love, liberated from guilt and spiritual depression, Isaiah steps forward, not out of obligation or guilt or needing to earn something, but freely: "Here am I; send me!" And after Peter is lifted up by Jesus and told not to be afraid, Jesus says that from now on he would be catching people. Look at that statement. It is not a direct call to Simon to follow Jesus. It is the making of a connection. What Simon has seen with the great haul of fish can happen with people, too. God's abundance is there for everyone. And Simon can be part of helping that to happen. "Catching people" has the sense of rescuing or saving. But it's only a statement, an offer, as though Jesus is saying, "If you were to come with me, you would be involved in helping others see what you now see, live life as it is really meant to be lived; you will rescue others just as you have felt rescued, from scarcity to abundance, not just materially but spiritually as well."

The last verse of our reading makes it plain that the response of the fishermen to Jesus is utterly free and total. They leave everything and follow him. The response is immediate and complete, nothing held back. We get no indication that there was any time for self-searching or settling affairs or sitting down to plot the future. They leave everything and follow. What they have seen in Jesus leads them to the only conclusion possible—the full and meaningful life can only be found by going with this person. This man holds the key to abundant life. In his company we will learn how to live this life fully and completely as those who are made by God. We will grow in the knowledge of who we truly are and just how sacred this world, this life is. And we will be given ways

to share that good news with others through the particular callings and gifts God gives to us. Such a life can only be entered into out of complete freedom.

What we learn from these stories might be seen as preparing us to hear the specific call of God in Christ to us, the call to live out in a particular way, through our particular gifts, the love of God for the world. These things are essential for the spiritual life and we will need to remember and return to them again and again along our journey:

The call of God awakens us to the sacredness and abundance of life, to awe and wonder.

The life of call arises out of a spirit of humility, an awareness that our lives drift so easily from living as we were made by God to live. And this humility comes from knowing we are just like other people in our forgetfulness and our need.

Responding to the call of God in Christ must be in complete freedom and joy, not out of obligation or guilt or the desire to gain some kind of status, spiritual or otherwise. Only in such freedom can we give ourselves completely to God and to life.

Let us pray:

Open our hearts, O God, to know your presence throughout all creation. Save us from the futility of self-condemnation and fear. Grant us the freedom to say, "Here I am, Lord; send me." Amen.