

February 4, 2007/Fifth Sunday after Epiphany/David L. Edwards

From Despondency to Call

Isaiah 6:1-8 *And I said, “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!”*

Luke 5:1-11 *Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.”*

The stories of Isaiah’s call and of Jesus calling his first disciples are like bookends, one from Hebrew Scriptures, and one from Christian Scriptures. They give a common picture of the central dimensions or experiences of the life of faith.

First, there is the encounter with and awareness of the sacred dimension of life, God’s presence and holiness within and beyond the world around us. In the Jerusalem temple, Isaiah suddenly sees the very presence of God. The veil of the ordinary is drawn back and the extra-ordinary background is revealed. In Luke’s story, the fishermen have been working the same waters for years, perhaps generations. One day there comes this teacher who draws such a crowd that he borrows one of the boats to get out from the shore a ways. After teaching, he tells Simon Peter to row out into the deep water and put down the nets. “What’s the use?” replies Peter. “We’ve been fishing all night and caught nothing. But because you say so, I’ll do it.” Suddenly the net is full of fish. Peter is stunned as he experiences in Jesus the presence of God.

Most of the time we live at the level of the ordinary. Then something happens and we see that this world and our lives are the expression of a deeper reality. Sometimes it has to hit us over the head. Sometimes, if we are practicing spiritual awareness through what we call the inward journey, we see it more regularly. Most of the time, our awareness of the sacred dimension of life comes without such experiences as Isaiah’s vision or Jesus’ miracle catch of fish.

On the last morning of my retreat at the Sisters of Loretto Motherhouse in Kentucky, I took a walk just before lunch. After three days of rather gloomy weather, the sun had come out in full force. I walked out to Mary’s Lake, through the fields, and then around the lake through the woods. Returning, I stopped in the church to sit until

the lunch bell. I sat beneath one of the cascades of sunlight pouring through the tall windows out of a brilliant blue sky, enjoying the warmth and light.

My retreat had been restful, of course. But there was also the assessing of the condition of my life. I had sorted through things I need to let go of and what I needed to hold onto in order to be more faithful to who God made me to be and what I feel God has called and gifted me to do with my life. Retreats are for spiritual and physical rest, and the regaining of inward peace. They also enable us to do difficult but important spiritual work. Here at the end of my retreat I simply sat in the silence of that vaulted sanctuary, basking in the sunlight and the light of God’s presence and love that is always pouring over us, whether we are aware of it or not.

Looking out the window, up into the trees and the blue sky, I thought of the scene from Isaiah. It was only the hem of God’s robe that filled the temple. The full reality of God was far beyond the confines of that temple or the sanctuary in which I sat. Maybe we are finally learning that God is not contained in or confined to our places of worship, or our particular church or religious tradition. Given the current expressions of religious extremism, whether Muslim, Jewish, Christian, or whatever, could it be that we are being awakened to the “beyondness” of God who does not live in the boundaries of our words or doctrines or rituals? Could it be that we are finally learning that religion is not an end in itself but only a means for perceiving the “hem of God’s robe,” and that we must continue to grow in our awareness of the mystery and majesty of God who is beyond all and yet embraces all? I hope this is so.

The second dimension or experience of faith is awareness of our being out of harmony as individuals and as a human family with the sacred dimension of life. Isaiah’s vision of God floods him with awareness of how far he and his people are from life as God made it to be lived. He feels like a man of “unclean lips” living among a people of “unclean lips.” This is a biblical way of speaking about the disconnection of our lives. Our lips say one thing; our lives say another. There is a lot of religious talk, but our lives are not compassionate, just, or peaceable.

Simon Peter collapses in despondency when he realizes Jesus is a man fully in touch and in harmony with God. He cries out that he is a sinful man and just wants Jesus to go away. When we feel guilt or

shame, we want everyone to just go away. We want to crawl in a hole!

Isaiah and Simon Peter, in their awakened spiritual awareness, see how far they and their fellow human beings have wandered from the sacredness of life. This is a good definition of what the Bible means by sin. It is human life out of harmony with how God created it to be. When we see life as God's beloved and sacred creation, including our own lives, then our awareness of disconnected life, of disharmony, becomes sharp and painful. We can feel overcome to the point of despondency. What's the use! We're all hopeless!

But Jesus won't go away. God won't go away. God sends a seraph to the temple altar to get a burning coal. The seraph touches Isaiah's lips with it and pronounces his guilt and sin covered, put away. Jesus doesn't seem to listen to Simon Peter's agonized confession. He quickly tells him not to be afraid.

This is the third dimension, or experience, of faith--the experience of grace, forgiveness, restoration. God does not want us sinking into despair about ourselves or the human family or life itself. God's forgiveness is the putting away of guilt and shame so that we can move on and be who God made us to be and do what God gives us to do. God lifts us up from the discouragement we feel when we see the realities of our situation. God treats us as whole even when we see ourselves as completely broken. God's love covers over our sense of shame or guilt so that we begin living in harmony with the sacredness of life around us and in us.

It is as though God is saying: "Okay, you are right. Things are a mess. Maybe you are a mess. But we don't have time to waste wallowing in shame or guilt or self-pity. Here: You are forgiven. Now let's move on. I have something for you to do." **And this is the fourth dimension or experience of faith: God's call and our response.** After Isaiah has glimpsed the majesty and glory of God, after God has lifted him up out of the pit of despair, God asks: Whom shall I send? Isaiah is ready to respond: Here I am! Send me! Jesus offers the invitation to make that catch of fish into a real miracle in these fishermen's lives. You see, it's not about the fish or about believing Jesus performed miracles. It's about what Jesus wants to do with our lives, the way he calls us to live so that we experience and share the abundance of this life God has made. Don't be afraid! Come on, let's start catching people. That's an image Jesus uses for following him in the life of discipleship and sharing that life with

others, a life becoming more and more in harmony with God's love and will, a life of true abundance.

These two stories can speak to us in our individual lives. The importance of our awareness of the sacredness of life around us and of our own lives. God's forgiveness that seeks to lead us beyond shame and guilt and despondency. And God's call in our lives, what God is calling me to do with this precious and unique life I've been given.

However, there is a wider context for listening to these stories, what they say to us as a nation, a human family, a world. This week, with these readings in my mind, I listened to the report on global climate change issued by the conference in France. It confirms that we are living in ways that devastate the very harmony of life that supports us. The global warming crisis is trying to awaken us to the reality of the sacred dimension of life, that there is a unity and harmony into which our own lives are woven. That harmony is benevolent and life sustaining, and when we live counter to it, we bring disaster down on our own heads. It is simply what Jewish and Christian scriptures call the creation, and the role of stewardship of that creation that God has entrusted to us.

We can wake up from the illusions in which we have been living, that we can and have the right to live any way we want, or we can witness the continued dismantling of the web of life. President Bush, with the backing of corporations, chooses the illusion: the economy over the environment. By economy, he means money and the making of money. So we are to have a moneymaking economy with no future for our children and their children. The word "economy" comes from the Greek word *oikonomia*, which means the careful and responsible management of the household. In this case, it is the household of life itself, the creation. That's the kind of economy we desperately need to be learning and practicing.

We may feel discouragement, even despair, over the situation. Like Isaiah, we see that we are persons of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips. Yes, corporate and governmental systems are the major culprits, but our own lifestyles lend support. However, the message of these two stories is not hopelessness. It is one of reawakening to reality, to the sacredness of life. It is the message of forgiveness, of being lifted out of shame or guilt or despondency or fear. It is the message of God's calling us to live in ways that embrace and enhance the sacredness of life, to live as those who know life IS the expression of sacredness itself, of God.