

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 call of Isaiah and Jesus calling his first disciples are like bookends, one from Hebrew and one from Christian Scriptures. They highlight a central dimension of the life of faith, what we describe as God's call in our lives. Our community emphasizes that each person is called by God to live his or her life for the sake of the world that God made. Call, or vocation, is at the heart of life. Our important spiritual work is to become aware of and live out who we feel in our deepest being God made us to be and gives us to do. The stories from Isaiah and Luke express common experiences when we live on the basis of call.

First, there is our awakening to 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. Not God's whole being, but the hem of God's robe. 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 a boat to get out from the shore a ways. After teaching, he tells Simon Peter to row out into 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 through Jesus the presence of God and the bounty of God's world.

Most of the time we live at the level of the ordinary. Our minds have grown numb to everything and everyone around us. Ordinarity, I have realized, is not in the world; it is in our minds that have gone to sleep. We stop seeing things and people as they really are. We see them through the grids and darkened glass of our preconceptions, our accumulated knowledge, our endless theories and handy explanations. Then something happens and we see the world and our own lives as the expression of a deeper reality and mystery. Sometimes an extraordinary experience shakes us from our sleep. However, if we are practicing spiritual awareness through what we call the inward journey, we see it more frequently. Our awareness of the sacred dimension of life can re-awaken without such elaborate experiences as Isaiah's vision or the miracle catch of fish.

A few years ago I was on retreat at the Sisters of Loretto motherhouse in Kentucky. It was my last morning, and 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 through the fields to Mary's Lake, and then around the lake through the woods. Returning, I stopped in the church to sit until the lunch bell. I sat beneath a cascade of sunlight pouring through the tall windows out of a brilliant blue sky, enjoying the warmth and light.

My retreat had been restful. As always, there had been the spiritual work of assessing the condition of my life. I had sorted through things I needed 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 felt God had called and gifted me to do with my life. We need to such times of retreat to do the sometimes difficult but always important spiritual work of getting in touch with our calling, our vocation in life.

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. I thought, Maybe we are finally learning that God is not confined to our places of worship, or our particular church or religious tradition. Given the rise in 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 hoped this was so.

As we open more and more to this "hem of God's robe" that is all around us in the creation, we begin to know our lives as part of a world that is sacred. We begin to live with what scripture calls "the fear of God." It

has nothing to do with "being afraid of" God. It means living with a sense of deep awe at the world of which we are part, in which we see the hem of God's robe and become more aware of the incredible bounty of life.

A second thing. In both stories there is awareness of being out of harmony as individuals and as a human family with the world as sacred. 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, loving, or peaceable.

Simon Peter collapses in despondency when he realizes Jesus is fully 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 drifted from living life as sacred. This is a good definition of what the Bible means by sin--life out of harmony with how God created it to be. When we see the world as God's beloved creation, including our own lives, then our awareness of disharmony becomes sharp and painful. We can feel waves of despondency washing over us. What's the use! We're all hopeless!

However, Jesus does not go away. God does not wipe out Isaiah. God sends a seraph to the temple altar to get a burning coal, with which it touches Isaiah's lips, an act of cleansing and forgiving. Jesus doesn't seem to pay much attention to Simon Peter's agonized confession. He quickly tells him and the others not to be afraid. **This is the third dimension, or experience, of faith--the experience of grace, forgiveness, restoration.** This is a very important part of both stories. Recognizing our sin, disharmony, and disconnection is part of living a responsible life. However, the problem is that the church has dwelt on our sinfulness too much and not enough on moving beyond our sinfulness, or brokenness, or whatever you want to call it. It is easy to sink down into feelings of worthlessness or powerlessness when we become aware of our sins and shortcomings, as persons or as a human family. The idea of "original sin" has some appeal, since our human depravity seems so rampant and thorough going. However, it is also a convenient excuse for avoiding becoming responsible and changed human beings. When you point out my hatefulness, violence, greed, my self-pity or lack of willingness to live differently, I can shrug my shoulders and say, "What did you expect from an original sinner like me?!"

That is not the biblical view. Isaiah's lips and life are cleansed. Peter is stood up on his feet. The forgiveness of God is not an end in itself. "Being forgiven", as proclaimed on many a bumper sticker and license plate, is not the final definition of what it means to be a person of faith. The grace of God's forgiveness is so that we can live our lives in response to God's call. God is not interested in our wallowing in 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 regards us as whole even when we see ourselves as broken. God's love covers over our sense of shame or guilt or deficiency so that we begin living in harmony with the sacredness of life around 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 on shame or guilt or self-pity. Here: You are forgiven. Now let's move on. I have something for you to do." **This is the fourth dimension of the life of faith: God's call and our response.** After Isaiah has glimpsed the majesty and glory of God, after God has lifted him out of despair, God asks: Whom shall I send? [Notice the text: God says, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for US?" Who is "us"? It isn't really a big deal, but the ancient view was that God presided over a heavenly council. Even God needed others with whom to make decisions!] The story is kind of humorous. It is as though God is speaking the question into the air, in a rhetorical way, not addressing Isaiah directly, but so that Isaiah can overhear the question.

Isaiah is ready to respond: Here I am! Send me! He doesn't even know what the job is! And Jesus offers the fishermen a new kind of life. 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. And the fishermen just get up and go. They have no clue where they are headed! There has been released in them a willingness, an openness, a desire to live their lives in the service of life. Here I am; send me! Okay, Jesus, I'm with you. Let's go.

The stories end here, for today. We are left to touch in our own lives the sacredness of life, the grace that moves us beyond guilt, shame, and disharmony, and the life of vocation, of being called. I think that as each of

us becomes more aware of these dimensions of the life of faith, we will be able to discover and become aware of, in each moment and at each stage of our lives, who we are made to be and what we are called to do with these precious lives God has given us.