

5th Sunday After Epiphany, Year C-Ruth Huston

Isaiah 6 and Luke 5.1-11

Annie Dillard says that most of us expect far too little from our worship services. If we believed that we could truly encounter the living God in worship, we would “strap on head gear and tie ourselves to the pews!” Well folks, get your helmets on and buckle up!—because the Old Testament lection narrates in good Epiphany fashion, an appearance of God in worship so overwhelming and intense that it prompts an immediate desire to serve God faithfully, even when the going gets rough. Our New Testament narrative recounts another appearance of God, this time in Christ, so profound and life-changing that it prompts a similar commitment to follow.

The passage from Isaiah 6 has become an influential narrative in my own understanding of God and my work in the world. When I was in grade school my family spent each summer at Thamesford Campground in Ontario, where we had an A-framed cabin that my father built. We lived there almost all summer (it was an inexpensive form of holiday for a poor pastor’s family), attending the various camps: conference, family, CYC, FMY—and when camps weren’t in session, we stayed throughout the summer, along with several other families. Oh, the memories! Every few days the ice man would come and deliver huge blocks of ice to put in our Italian refrigerator, known as the Ica Boxa. We feasted on ears of corn, 19 cents a dozen and washed up in the nearby stream. The campground was our Kingdom. One particular Family Camp Sunday morning stands out in my memory. I even remember what I was wearing. I had argued with Mum cuz I didn’t want to wear the sleeveless dress that tied in a bow in back. It had a scratchy, lace collar so it was uncomfortable, but you see, it matched perfectly my little hat and gloves so it made sense to Mum. But she didn’t have to wear it.

In my scratchy dress, I walked into the huge tabernacle (which incidentally, I returned to this past summer with Richard and it’s not nearly as huge as the picture in my mind) and across the front in big bold letters, “Whom will I send?” And at the other end another banner, “Here am I, send me!” One of our bishops preached on these famous words that morning from Isaiah. I don’t remember which bishop. Could have been Vondria Bergen’s father, Bishop Andrews. Perhaps Bishop Crydermann or Ellis—maybe Fairbairn. I don’t remember the messenger, but I DO remember the story. It took my breath away and I found myself responding just like Isaiah.

It took place in the temple during worship. King Uzziah had just died. Now, according to the Chronicler, he was a good and righteous king who had ruled over Judah during one of their longest and most prosperous periods. But now he was gone. Israel was pressuring them to help them overtake Assyria and Judah wondered what would happen now. Who would lead them? Jotham, son of Uzziah? And would he continue Uzziah’s righteous rule? What if he didn’t?

With the fate of the kingship in question, Isaiah had a vision of God in the temple while at worship. In his vision, God was seated on a grand, lofty throne—the mercy seat—in the holy of holies. The bottom hem of his robe was so huge, it filled the whole temple. This gigantic God

with a gigantic robe is served by larger-than-life fiery winged creatures who sang, “ Holy, holy, holy.” The temple shook. The whole earth couldn’t contain His glory. Everywhere Isaiah turned—there was the glory of God. Even we moderns, accustomed to fantastic displays of pyrotechnics and lights and Dolby sound, ooh and aah at the images we see and hear and smell in this story of God’s epiphany to Isaiah.

Isaiah’s response in the presence of the Divine? I am silenced! A typical one really, in the presence of holiness. I’m a man of unclean lips and I live with people of unclean lips—God’s Presence helps Isaiah recognize both his individual and corporate sin. A seraph comes and purifies his unclean lips with a coal (interesting in light of the fact that he would already have been made ritually pure else he would never have been able to enter the temple in the first place). Once he’s pure, God commissions him, “Whom shall I send?” Can you imagine the voice? None other than James Earl Jones could fill this role! Without even knowing where he was going or what the details were, but out of a response to this magnificent experience, Isaiah declares, “Here am I, send me!” What command. What courage! What obedience! What desire to serve!

And what a call—way better than last week’s call of Jeremiah. Jeremiah is one-upped. This sets the bar for call stories into the stratosphere. Isaiah’s call from God is unparalleled among the prophets. Usually, God has to talk the prophets into their tasks. Not Isaiah. “Here am I, send me.” Perhaps our stories of God’s call on our lives won’t be this phenomenal or perhaps they will—however God invites us to join in governing/creating/and tending the creation, I hope we respond with Isaiah’s impulsive, abandoned, “Here am I, send me!”

Oh, wait a minute. Isaiah doesn’t even know what he has signed up for yet. He’s signed on the dotted line without reading the fine print. Everybody knows ya gotta read the fine print. Is he naïve or what? Ahh, stay tuned. The smoke clears, the coals’ embers have died out, the seraphim have packed it in. Here’s the rest of the story. Those pesky little things called details of his job description. And what a miserable mission this would be. Listen to this. First, your mission will fail. No matter how long the people listen (hear and hear), they will not understand. No matter how long they look (see and see), they won’t get it. In fact, God tells Isaiah that Isaiah is to make their hearts dull, their ears heavy, their eyes sealed over for the express purpose that they will not be able to see or hear or understand. Makes you wish that we had stopped at verse 8! Now that would sell tickets. But this, how are we going to recruit anybody to follow God if we tell them the whole truth and nothing but the truth? Not good PR.

What sane person would accept this job? It’s none other than a call to failure. It flies in the face of every How to Succeed book ever written! I’m sure Isaiah is wondering about now what he’s gotten himself into. Now that he’s read the fine print, he objects, just like all the other prophets. How long, LORD? How long do I have to do this? And God basically tells him, “Until forever!” Until—look at the untills. Until cities lie in waste, until houses are abandoned, until the land is desolate, until there’s nothing left of the mighty oak except the stump.

I wonder how many times, as Isaiah was in the middle of preaching until no one listened, he had to will himself to remember that epiphanal moment in the temple when he answered God's call. I suspect that he had to revisit that experience many times. God's glory carried him when the mission became miserable and results weren't fantastic.

Following God's call is often difficult and we won't always realize our hopes and expectations. Theologian, Beth Tanner, reminds us that there is a price to be paid for singing, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty," especially if we're singing it in the face of those who think otherwise. But when things are bleak, the Divine Presence carries us. We can remember God's call and our commitment to that call. That's, in part, what we do every Sabbath as we come together. We hear again God's call on our lives and recommit for another week to follow.

The gospel lesson tells of another call that mirrors that of Isaiah, this time, however, to a bunch of fishermen. This particular fish story appears in all of the Gospels—typical. Proof that men wrote these gospels. Why, Jesus' birth isn't even included in all 4! But a fish story. Must be quite a spectacular one. The Lukan version is my favourite, in part because Peter takes a prominent position—my second favourite disciple after Thomas. Commentator, Craig Evans writes that Luke portrays him almost like the Beloved Disciple in John's Gospel.

We get Luke's version this Sunday—it's the longest of all of them. When we read it in Mark, we're a little surprised that out of the blue, these fishermen would just up and follow Jesus. We're given no back story to explain why they would do such a radical thing—leave their nets jampacked full of fish and follow a man they didn't know? But Luke locates the story within a more logical context. Jesus comes to them after preaching all throughout Galilee and he's healed many, including Peter's mother-in-law. This story, then, becomes almost a climax to what has come before.

While Jesus' appearance in Luke 5 isn't on the grand scale of God's epiphany in Isaiah, the response of the disciples is much like that of Isaiah's. Yes, there's still miracle, in this case a miraculous catch of fish, but I grew up in a family of fishers and I've heard many "miraculous" fish stories so perhaps I'm a little hardened. Anyway, Jesus' reputation had made it hard for him to move around with ease. On this occasion, the crowds started pressing him, so he asked Simon if he would take his boat out a few feet from the water's edge so Jesus could talk to the people from the boat. Now Simon and his partners, James and John, had just returned from a long night of fishing—with no fish! So they must have been exhausted and disillusioned. They couldn't afford too many nights with no catch. But Simon Peter agreed. When Jesus finished preaching, he urged these veteran fishermen to go back out into the deep waters of the Sea of Galilee and fish some more. Isn't it interesting that Jesus, a carpenter, knew when and where the experienced fishermen can find an abundant catch (The Lectionary Commentary)? They caught so many fish that they had to get their other boat—by the end of this trip both boats were so full, they began to sink.

Peter's response to Jesus? Much like Isaiah's. Profound awe. He fell on his knees, "Get away from me because I'm a sinful man." In the presence of Jesus, he could see himself more clearly perhaps. He recognized his own unworthiness. This realization is the greater miracle—the catch of fish pointed to something even greater. The beginning of Peter's transformation.

So Jesus invited them to start catching men alive instead of fish that would die. And, like Isaiah, they responded immediately and completely— without looking back? Or perhaps, they did look back—months, years, decades after this life-changing experience, when the going got tough and the people's ears and eyes didn't hear and see and they didn't understand and they became frustrated, perhaps it was this experience of their Master who called them that carried them through.

These calls of God aren't unique to Isaiah and Peter. Sure, the grand details might not be the norm. Certainly, my own call of God didn't include smoke and coals or shaking temples nor did it include boats and lots of fish. I simply responded to God, "Here am I, send me." Short on miracle, but not short on transformation. I committed what I was good at, what I was passionate about, who I am in service to God. God has called all of us and all of creation, to follow him, to be like him and help him save the world. Louis Evely in *In the Christian Spirit*, says, "To believe in God is to believe in the salvation of the world. . . I often say to myself that, in our religion, God must feel very much alone: for is there anyone besides God who believes in the salvation of the world? God seeks among us sons and daughters who resemble God enough, who love the world enough so that God could send them into the world to save it." Like Isaiah and Peter before us, we've been called to do God's work in the world. Let's say Yes, and God-with-us, Emmanuel, goes with us.