

## FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Isaiah 6:1-9; Psalm 1:38; Luke 5:1-11

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Juanita and I don't always agree on pruning bushes around our yard. I favor the "cut it way back" approach. Juanita prefers a more moderate approach. Our neighbors, the Baskervills, have a picture-perfect landscaped yard. So I asked Pam about the best time to prune. She said, "My mother always said, 'The right time to cut back the shrubs is whenever your husband agrees to do it.'" I've heard something similar about fishing and have followed the wise sage who said, "The best time to go fishing is whenever you can."

Now this might be fine for the weekend fisherman like me, but those who fish for a living know that fish don't bite just any old time. On the Sea of Galilee or Genessarett, as it is called here in Luke's gospel, the commercial fishermen knew the best times and locations to fill their boat were at night, in the shallows, when the fish came in to feed.

On this particular morning, they were discouraged from fishing all night without much success. They were undoubtedly tired, hungry and eager to finish cleaning the nets, put them away, and head for their homes. But Jesus was nearby and he'd drawn a crowd – so many eager to hear him, in fact, that he couldn't teach. He needed a little distance. This was a welcome change after last week when the crowd in Nazareth pressed forward to lynch him.

Peter, called Simon here, may very well not have welcomed Jesus' request to use him and his boat. He did it anyway. Maybe Peter napped in the bow while Jesus taught from the stern. When Jesus was finished, Peter was eager to row him to shore and get that much-needed breakfast, then some shut-eye. But Jesus wants still more of him.

"Simon, put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon must have thought to himself, "You've gotta be kidding! Who are you, Jesus, to be giving seasoned fishermen like us such orders? You don't know the first thing about catching fish." Keep in mind this would involve unpacking the freshly cleaned nets and fishing at the wrong time and in the wrong place. It's a wonder Peter agrees to Jesus' demand.

Every once in awhile, I get home from church after a long day and just want to eat dinner, watch a little TV, read and go to bed, but I get a call that someone's desperately sick or has died. It's tempting to say, "I'll come by first thing in the morning." But after I've gone to the house or hospital, I'm always glad that I did. That seems to be the time when I can do the most good just by showing up and being with the patient or family. It's also when I most feel part of this larger family we call "church." Being part of this fellowship is for me, and I know for many of you, a great gift, a miracle of abundant love, caring and acceptance.

Simon Peter overcomes his fatigue and skepticism and puts out into deep water, maybe only out of a sense of loyalty and affection he's only just begun to have for this person, Jesus. I doubt he expects any good results from more fishing in broad daylight.

A surprise isn't a surprise if we expect it or anticipate it. Peter was more than surprised; he and the rest were amazed – I dare say overwhelmed. Perhaps, the largest catch ever. Obviously, it wasn't due to Peter's skill or vast experience. Something far greater was operating here – mystery, majesty and holiness. All he could do was drop to his knees, a defeated, inadequate human being. He was out of his league and he knew it. He was in deep, deep water, way over his head. "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." In Jesus' presence, we would all be brought low. His glory exposes our shallowness. His goodness reveals our self-centeredness.

Good Friday may be the day that causes us to feel a little like Peter as we meditate on the cross. What Jesus did for us makes all we do for him seem paltry in comparison. That's why many people avoid Good Friday services – it makes us feel bad, unsettled.

Peter wanted Jesus to go away from him because he didn't like feeling so insignificant and unworthy. Obviously it's not the way Jesus wanted him or us to feel for long, however true it is. "Don't be afraid," he says. "I've got important work for you to do. Get up and let's be going."

Similarly, Isaiah has an epiphany. Mystery, majesty and holiness are revealed to him in a grand vision. God is so big that the mere hem of his robe fills the Temple. Our "Sanctus," what I consider the crescendo of our Eucharistic worship, comes from Isaiah's vision of the seraphs with six wings calling to one another, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory."

Tonight crowds of people in a football stadium will be cheering for the New Orleans Saints or the Indianapolis Colts with wild abandon as if their lives depend on the outcome. We should have such enthusiasm and energy when we offer our cheer to God – "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord; God of power and might; Heaven and earth are full of your glory; Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest."

Like Peter long after him, Isaiah is humbled to his very core. "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips." And just as Jesus desires not to judge Peter, the Lord on the throne has a seraph touch Isaiah's lips with a hot coal and announce his sins are blotted out. Again, God has a holy task for Isaiah. There's no time to wallow in his wretchedness.

King Uzziah had reigned for forty-one years as Monarch of Judah during a time of relative prosperity and peace. His death was unwelcome as a formidable foe in the nation of Assyria to the northeast was threatening the entire region. Transition, instability and uncertainty were in the air when Isaiah accepted the call of God to be a mouthpiece.

We live in uncertain times when threats abound from within and without. Will we accept the call to be people grounded in God's faithfulness, mystery, majesty and holiness? Can we accept the challenge to extend ourselves even into unfamiliar waters, abandoning old tactics for a new Jesus way? Can we get up and accept tasks Jesus has for us to bring people to new life?

In Luke's gospel Jesus' call to Simon Peter, James and John is purely practical. The crowds are too big for one person. Jesus needs help. Jesus still needs help. Just as we have been caught in Jesus' people-catching net, so are we to do some casting. Personal transformation or spiritual

growth are not for our own benefit but so that we can become more attractive bait. Our interest in others' welfare might interest them in the source of our natures, which is, of course, the love of Christ Jesus.

Interestingly, in both Bible Study classes last week, someone asked, "What happened to all the fish?" The fish fed the entire community. We are many, with an abundance of gifts and resources for feeding our communities in the power and name of Jesus. Amen.