God's Surprising Call

Isaiah 6:1-8, Luke 5:1-11
Sunday, February 9, 2025
Fifth Sunday of Epiphany

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God's call surprises us with visions of transformation and grace,
inviting us to a life of faith and following.

Luke 5:1-11 is a story of surprises. It is the story of unsuccessful fishermen whose boats and nets were empty after a long night of working. They are surprised when Jesus calls them to go back to the deep part of the lake to lay down their nets once more. In those days, commercial fishermen knew that the best time to fish was in the evenings when the fish would come to the shallow parts of the lake to feed. They are no doubt surprised that this advice comes from a non-fisherman, a consultant with no expertise. When they heed his advice, they are then surprised by the overwhelming abundance of fish that they catch. Finally, in light of all of these surprises, the greatest surprise of all is that they leave all of the fish behind.

Isaiah's words come as an equally powerful surprise. "Who will go for us? Whom shall I send?" The words are electric, spine-tingling. They ripple with the awareness of God that commands our attention, engulfing our bodies. For Isaiah, this was a decisive moment, an experience like no other. Sitting in the temple, praying, he is immediately placed in the presence of God, surrounded by flying snake-like creatures, thick clouds of smoke and a voice that shakes the thresholds of the temple's foundations.

These are life-shaping words. For me, they take me back to a time when God's call in my life seemed especially clear. In the year that I was studying in England, on a cold night, I sat in my room in an equally cold and drafty 18th century Regency style townhouse flipping through the pages of scripture. I'm not sure why I was reading the Bible that evening, though perhaps I was trying to figure why I had left sunny and warm Southern California for a brisk British winter. But I do remember it was cold, and that as I thumbed through the pages of scripture I landed on these words from Isaiah. My eyes widened at the way Isaiah described these super-bowl sized special effects. And then I read: Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me![1]

[1] *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), Is 6:1–8.

And there it was: a confirmation for me, at least, of all those years of wondering and praying and thinking about what others would call "my call to ministry." And, as they say, that was it. That was the moment when I realized that the questions I had been having about whether or not to go into ministry had been resolved. That was the moment I felt the very basic contours of a call fall into place for me. To be clear: there were no flying seraphs circling my head – I know I would have remembered that – and I had no astonishing vision of God's holiness filling my room – God was far too smart than to be showing up in a cold night in Britain in January!

We bandy about words like "being called," or "God's call on my life," tending to associate them with the vocational choices of ministers or prophets. We hear these stories from Luke and from Isaiah as stories for a certain type of person, or even as stories describing the "super bowl" moments of faith when the powerful presence of God erupts in our lives with championship special effects.

These stories hold out the terrifying possibility that faith can change us. And because of that we tend to say to ourselves, "these are stories are for some, but not for me."

"Here I am," I whispered. "Send me." It was an intensely personal moment, but I do not mean to over dramatize it. I could have just as easily felt as if I should become a journalist, or a lawyer, a professor or any other careers I had considered. What I would later realize and come to know to be as true as anything I have ever known is that our discovery of what we are meant to be never happens quickly or perhaps even fully in one moment. It is almost always a long process that involves what Parker Palmer calls "listening to your life." And it invariably involves learning to see how our ordinary gifts and talents are connected to God's astonishing holiness.

We hear "call" stories and immediately we imagine stories of especially holy people, or people who seem to be especially qualified for the task of speaking for God. But the story begins by reminding us Isaiah is a man of unclean lips, a sinner living among other sinners.. Isaiah did not get out of bed that day imagining that he would see visions of God's holy splendor, let alone flying snakes. (Let me go on record to say that if God had shown me visions of flying snakes, I would likely have never stepped foot inside of a seminary.)

God's calls emerge from moments of failure and frustration. It begins as he realizes not that he is a star quarterback, a celebrity receiver playing for a team with three Super Bowl victories under its belt. It is, instead, a moment when he realizes that he is a person with unclean lips in the midst of a people whose sins and failures are too numerous to recite. Here is an ordinary person, summoned by God's surprising and astonishing grace.

It's what the Apostle Peter discovers that morning when Jesus comes walking along the shoreline. In both Matthew and Mark's gospels, the calling of the disciples happens early in the story. But Luke changes things a bit. Jesus has been preaching, teaching, healing for some time, creating a bit of a name for himself. He comes along the shores of the sea of Galilee that morning. He sees Peter and his friends cleaning up their nets from a rather disappointing night of fishing. A crowd has been following Jesus, and he decides to speak with them. He asks Peter and his friends if they would mind him if he turned a bow of a boat into a makeshift pulpit. And he then begins to speak to them. It is an ordinary moment, but one infused with holiness.

We've seen the marvelous blending of the holy and the ordinary throughout Epiphany. Star-gazing magi show up on the doorstep of confused young parents. Wedding guests discover amazing new wine, more than they could have ever imagined. A hymn of love helps heal ego-driven divisions in a congregation. Jesus preaches a sermon to his hometown friends. Epiphany reminds us of the abundance of God's provision. It calls us to feel ourselves called by God's grace, touched by God's holiness so that our lives are transformed and changed.

The holy invites the ordinary to dance in surprising and astonishing ways.

Peter is hesitant to go to those waters because he knows that this is not where the fish are located. Whoever this Jesus may be, he is clearly not a fishing expert. Anyone with knowledge of fishing in Galilee would tell him the best time to fish is at night when the fish come close to the shore to feed.

Yet Jesus finishes his sermon and then turns to Peter and says, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Jesus' words are like salt poured into an open wound. They are audacious, and just a bit presumptuous. What does this guy know? He's a carpenter, not a fisher. His hands have not known the burning that comes from pulling nets into the sea. His body does not know the frustration of staying up all night, catching nothing.

Think of that for a second: Jesus appears on the shoreline of imperfection and struggle. He comes to call people to follow him in proclaiming the reign of God. He is establishing his church, his community…but he does not go to religious authorities or people with special skills. He shows up in the boats of fishers who have been working all night and who have nothing to show for all their effort.

Peter is exhausted. He has worked all night along the shore, placing his nets and catching nothing. Galilean fishermen knew that the best catches were always at night near the shore. Fish would draw into the shallow waters to feed. Clearly Jesus has no clue what he is talking about when he tells them, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."

Stand on that shoreline for a moment. Think of those times when you have become discouraged, those long nights when nothing seems to have worked and frustration has settled upon you. Think of those times when you have felt the stabbing jabs of failure. Everything seems to be falling apart. Stand on the shoreline of defeat and ask yourself, "Would you be willing to listen to what Jesus is saying?"

But it is in that place that most surprising miracle awaits. For Isaiah, it was in heeding God's call that he found a word of hope which sustained him in times of struggle and disappointment.

For Isaiah, the invitation is to keep preaching a word of hope that people have lost their way. For Peter, it is a call to learn what it means to catch not fish, but people. It's a term that may cause us some concern. Taken literally, it sounds like Jesus intends for the disciples to use nets to grab unsuspecting people. Maybe that's what we should do to increase attendance!

Or maybe Jesus is calling Peter to do what he is already doing: showing up in the lives of people who are hopeless, exhausted, and worn out by culture that demands success and perfection. Perhaps Jesus is embodying what we would call a ministry of presence that dares to help others see that they are loved by God.

Jesus' invitation to Peter is to continue this ministry of presence. Not by "catching" them – with big nets or enticing traps – but by "catching" their hearts, standing with them, and journeying with them.

The implication is clear: Jesus invites Peter to push back from shore and go to those deeper waters where nothing is certain. He is invited to go to a place where nothing is certain. Jesus comes to us and invites us to go to the place where surprises may happen.

And this is the invitation to the church as well—we are invited to go and pick up our nets and get back to work, even in the places of our greatest discouragement. Jesus us that at the moments of our greatest discouragement – those times when nothing has worked right, years of financial struggle, declining numbers, all those frustrations. Jesus comes in that moment and stands with us in those places of discouragement and frustration. He invites us to go with him, to follow, and then says to us, "Who will go for us? Whom shall we send?" Amen.