

5th Sunday after Epiphany (L5C), February 9, 2025

Isaiah 6:1-13, 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, Luke 5:1-11

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

All three of our readings this morning are call stories in one way or another. In each of them people are being called into God's service – the prophet Isaiah in our first reading, the apostle Paul in our second reading, and the disciples in our Gospel reading. We don't get Paul's actual call story here, but he refers to it as if the reader already knows it. And we do know it from the book of Acts, and so we can say that all three call stories take place under extraordinary circumstances. Isaiah and Paul have visions. The disciples have this miraculous catch of fish. Isaiah and Paul are called individually. The disciples' call is collective. And so there is room to apply these various stories to our own vocations this morning, our own callings, both as individuals, and as a community of faith, a group of modern-day disciples.

If you are like me, then you do not have a miraculous call story. You were baptized as an infant and brought up by your parents and grandparents in the Christian faith. Your call story is not one you remember. Your parents brought you to be baptized before you knew what was going on. You didn't have a chance to say, as Isaiah did, "send me!" And so you might think that your call as a Christian is lacking in some way. And there's a whole segment of Christianity that would agree with you, those who think that infant baptism is not real baptism because they think of baptism as something you do for God, rather than as something that God does for you. On the other hand, if you came to faith later in life, you might doubt your own call for the exact opposite reasons – you don't have a family history in the church that goes back generations. You have not had the support of parents and grandparents in your life of faith. You don't know all of the jargon that everybody else seems to know. (What the heck is a narthex, anyway?)

Whether your story is like mine, or whether you came to faith later in life, I think that all three of our readings this morning help to clarify just what it means to be called into God's service, and reassure us that God doesn't make second-class calls. Each of our readings highlights an important point in this regard.

First, it's not our pedigree or our resume that matters, is the message we bear, which isn't *our* message. In our second reading Paul talks about his own call. He was not one of the original disciples who had been with Jesus throughout his earthly ministry. He was not even an eyewitness of Jesus' crucifixion or resurrection. He had actually been an *enemy* of the earliest church, a persecutor of the first Christians. Because of that, his credentials as an apostle of Jesus were challenged again and again. There are traces of this in a number of his letters, and our second reading this morning is one of those. He is owning his past here. He admits that he had been an enemy of the gospel he now proclaims. He knows he's a latecomer to the faith compared with many. But his message is the same as that of the original disciples because it is not his message after all, but Jesus'. He is only passing on what he received, from the other disciples and from Jesus himself who appeared to him in a vision. Paul knows that he is not worthy to be an apostle. But he is who he is. His past is his past, and he can't change that. His calling is something that God chose for him while he was still God's enemy! And God prefers not to destroy enemies, but to make them into friends. That is amazing grace.

Second, it is God and not us who determines the effectiveness of our calling. It's our Gospel reading that makes this point through this strange story of Jesus suggesting that the fishermen go back out again to catch some fish. We're so used to this story that we don't immediately catch the contrast between Jesus and these fishermen. They are pros. They do this for a living. They know that the best time to fish is at night or early morning. That time has passed and they caught nothing. It was a bad day at work. Then Jesus, the adopted son of a day laborer from an inland hill town,

suggests to these professional fisherman that they go back and try again. And they do. And that's maybe the most remarkable thing about this story, that they listened to Jesus in the first place instead of just laughing at him. They do what he suggests, and they haul in an amazing catch. Then comes the invitation to come with him and "catch people," which is a strange metaphor to our ears for proclaiming gospel. But Jesus here is playing off an ancient image of fish in the sea representing all the people all the people of the earth. The emphasis here is not so much on the catching, but the extent of the gospel's reach. The meaning of this incident for the disciples, and for us, is that if Jesus can deliver such results against their best professional judgement, maybe the same is true of his call to "catch people" through the work of the gospel.

Third, the gospel we are called to proclaim may not be the kind of news that we or others think we want or need. Our reading from Isaiah is this wonderful call story (that I talked about with the children) that has made its way into our liturgy. But the message that Isaiah is called to proclaim is not message of comfort that comes later in chapter 40, that their trials are over and everything is okay now. Everything is not okay for the people Isaiah is called to speak to, the rulers of Judah. They are headed for destruction because of their persistent, stubborn injustice and unfaithfulness. Yet there is a hint of good news even in this message, hidden right at the end. "The holy seed is the stump." The tree of the kingdom of Judah is coming down. There is lots of trouble ahead. But God will not let that be the end of their story.

I want to apply these three points that I've just taken us through to our own lives of faith, individually and collectively. First, there are no second-class calls in Christ's church. Each of us has been called in Holy Baptism to service in the Kingdom of God that is coming to pass even now, despite all evidence to the contrary. The task of proclaiming the gospel is ours together as the church, young and old, lay and clergy, lifelong Christians and newcomers alike.

Second, it is God and not we who determines the effectiveness of our calling. I have heard more than one story about pastors at the end of their careers who lament that their years as a pastor had been pointless, that they didn't have any noticeable effect on the people they were called to serve. Maybe there are similar stories about laypeople who have labored faithfully in the church all their lives. I expect there are. Maybe your story is one of them. I want to say that that is not our call to make. If by the grace of God we are persistent and faithful in proclaiming and embodying the message of gospel, it will be God alone who determines our effectiveness. And we might not get to see the results. Our task is proclaiming message in word and deed. The rest is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Third, the good news of Jesus Christ that is our calling is not some innocuous, private message of "pie in the sky," or "don't worry, be happy," or an assurance that nothing we do or fail to do matters. It is not a message of "peace, peace" where there is no peace, as the prophet Jeremiah complained. It is a hard message of darkness and light, of death and life, of crucifixion and resurrection, of sin and forgiveness. It is a message that enables us to face the worst about ourselves and the world we are part of, confident not that God will spare us from the consequences of our worst actions and inactions, but that God will not utterly abandon us to our folly or to the folly others impose on us, and that in the midst of disaster God reaches out to us and to all people, even enemies like Paul, to bear those consequences with us and for us, in order to make a way forward where there was no way, a future where there was no future, to bring good from evil, right from wrong, and life from death. And then God invites us to be God's agents and signs of hope through concrete acts of witness, advocacy, and service to others and the world God loves.

So rejoice in your calling, sisters and brothers in Christ, even and especially in difficult times. Rejoice in your calling and take heart in the gospel promise you are called to embody and proclaim. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto genuine, abundant, and everlasting life. Amen.