

# "Equipping the Called"

a sermon by

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Isaiah 6:1-8

Our scripture lesson for this afternoon comes to us from the book of the prophet Isaiah 6:1-8. It is the story of the call of the prophet.

“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. 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!” Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” 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!”

In first century Palestine at a lake called Gennesaret, a group of fishermen were washing their nets when a prophet, Jesus, walked up and inquired about the use of one of their boats. He had been preaching and teaching the Word of God such that a crowd now gathered around him and started pressing in on all sides.. So much so that he now asked some of the men to take him out just offshore in their boat so that he might have a little room to breathe so, they cast off. They hadn't had a catch all day, so looked doubtful when, after he had finished speaking to the crowd, Jesus turned to them and suggested that they lower their nets once again into the dark waters now streaked by the sunset. With a bit of resignation they lowered their nets and lifted them up once more only this time they came up bursting with fish. Upon seeing this, one of the fisherman called Simon Peter fell to his knees and said, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” For he and his partners, the brothers James and John with him, were all amazed at the catch. And the teacher Jesus had said to them, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be fishers of men.” And so they brought their boats to shore, left everything, and followed him.

Years later a man by the name of Paul sat at a small desk in the room of a roadside inn, penning a note to the young congregation that he had helped found in the city of Corinth. “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received (he wrote): that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time....then he appeared to James, then the apostles. And last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain...we proclaim (the good news) and so you have come to believe.”

So what do a fisherman and a reformed persecutor of the church have to do with Isaiah? The lectionary seems to think that they have something in common because the scriptures containing these stories are all packaged together for us this week. You can take your pick-

Isaiah 6, Luke chapter 5, 1 Corinthians 15, oh, and a Psalm of course. But if we look at them together as opposed to any one in isolation, we see that they collectively have quite a story to tell. A story about God, about a calling, and, yes, a story even about us.

The response of Isaiah to the presence and voice of the holy is one of utter transparency. There he stands in the temple. Winged seraphs- I don't even know what those are- but winged seraphs in attendance to God above him, calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of your glory." There is an earthquake and then, at the sound of the Almighty's voice, the whole place fills with smoke. Isaiah is surrounded by the majesty of God and when he is confronted with the divine he cries, "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!" Utter transparency. I am unworthy, but you are God. I should be dead by now. In the light of God's glory the blemish of Isaiah's sin is so completely exposed.<sup>1</sup> His inadequacy and shortcoming and failure made plain before him- made plain for all to see. How could this be the one whom God would call to such a task as going out into the world with the Almighty's Word on his tongue?

This same knee-buckling revelation hits Simon Peter too. At the sight of that net bursting with fish he drops to the floorboards, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" he says. The recognition of the divine has a humbling effect. This is not exactly an exemplary choice for a follower of God and it is plain for all, including Peter, to see and not only because he was sinful, but because he also simply came up empty. As one commentator notes, "You'd think that if you wanted to find somebody to become a 'fisher of people' you might want at the very least to choose somebody who had proven to be a pretty successful fisher of fish."<sup>2</sup> Something similar could be said for the Apostle Paul. Bent over that letter to the Corinthian church recalling that he once broke down doors to haul Christians to court he wrote, "I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." You will recall that his vision of the holy knocked him off his horse and left him blind for three days before he could see himself and the world in a new light. He was sinful, full of shortcomings. Full of hatred and disability and yet God chose...him.

Yes these would all seem to be unlikely candidates for the task of taking God's Word into the world and everyone, beginning with each of them, knew it. A man of unclean lips called to prophesy, a fishermen accustomed to coming up empty to mobilize the masses, a persecutor of the church called to preach. A pretty unremarkable lot full of shortcomings but God chose them. Its not that they were just exceptionally sinful its that, without exception, they were just like us. Filled with fears and insecurities. Far more adept at speaking profanity than truth. Rooted in sin, fallible in their nature, unworthy before the glory, and unequipped for the task at hand but God chose them. Met them right where they were at in their lives, in their spiritual walk, in their brokenness and imperfection and vulnerability, and chose them to bring his love into the world because they are the very ones whom God came to save.

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<sup>2</sup>Calvin Theological Seminary, Center for Excellence in Preaching

And not only that, not only does God meet them where they are to commission them with this remarkable task but he gives them what they will need for it as well. A hot coal to unclean lips purifies Isaiah and brings forgiveness where there was once only sin. At a word Jesus shows the fishermen that he could provide plenty in their lives where they once knew only want if only they would trust and obey. With a breath, the Lord spoke into a human heart shriveled and darkened by hatred and zealous ambition and brought peace. The striking realization of the ways these disciples would forever fall short is rivaled only by the grace of God to supply them with all that they could possibly need for his service with just a touch of his presence, a net load of his provision, a glimpse of his love. And we begin to see with these stories together a greater truth about discipleship and call. One that has the capacity to fill us with perhaps either terror or hope depending on where you find yourself in this particular story. It is a truth can be summed up in one familiar phrase: that God does not call the equipped. He equips the called.

Isaiah. Peter. Paul. These are among the ones we think of when we think of the greats of the Bible. They would be charged with preaching judgment and repentance to the nation but also restoration and hope. They would witness his arrest and handle his body down from cross but also see him walk and breathe and talk again. They would gather people together to talk about God's love, begin new churches, shape the formation of the community of faith, change lives, stir souls. But these were ordinary folks. Just like you and me. It was not their aptitude that led them to these things. It was their willingness to respond to the call of God's work and grace in their lives. To accept the daily provision of strength to help in a time of need rather than being content to hide from the task at hand behind the shame of their unworthiness before God. Trapped as they were in the conviction of their sin, shocked by their inadequacy. Bound as we all are to our weakness- that makes the need for grace all the more palpable. And the good news that it has been given all the more compelling to share. "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be fishers of men." Jesus had said. And so they brought their boats to shore, left everything, and followed him. "I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." Wrote Paul. "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain." "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." The seraph said. 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!"

A few centuries ago another author penned the lyrics to a festive little melody that had been knocking around his head. Just a little Psalm of praise. "I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise. I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness...On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul. Great is the glory of the Lord...For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly...though I walk in the midst of troubles, you preserve me...The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever." And so indeed it does. And so indeed it does. Amen.