

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 6:1-8
SECOND LESSON: Luke 5:1-11
March 6, 2022

“Called”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

A good little southern boy came running in late to Sunday School. Knowing he was usually very prompt, his teacher asked, “Johnny, is there anything wrong?”

“No, ma’am, not really,” he said. “I was going to go fishing, but my daddy told me that I needed to get on up and go to church.” The teacher was very impressed and asked Johnny if his father had explained to him why it was more important to go to church than to go fishing.

“Yes ma’am, he did,” Johnny said. “My daddy said he didn’t have enough bait for both of us.”

The ancient Jewish historian Josephus wrote that there were more than 230 fishing boats working the Sea of Galilee during the time of Jesus. Because we don’t live in a fishing community, we tend to have a romanticized view of fishing. We think of one or two people wiling away the day in a fishing boat. But this was a highly organized industry, and Peter and Andrew were very successful businessmen. They could afford a house in Capernaum. They could afford to hire workers. And these boats were not tiny. They were roughly 23 feet long and seven feet wide, capable of holding half a ton of fish and a crew of five. In deep water fishing two or three boats would go out at night, because the fish could not see the nets at night. They would work the nets between the boats to trap the fish. And they would perform this arduous task seven or eight times in a night in order to bring in that haul of half a ton of fish. Daylight did not bring a break, because the fish then had to be sorted. Some fish were kosher, some were not. Catfish were not kosher, so they either threw them back or sold them to Gentiles. Some were too small. They were used to make fish sauce. Some were for fresh use and others needed to be prepared and salted for transportation. Nets had to be repaired and cleaned. Only when all this was done could there be any rest. And to add to the work everything was taxed so they needed to keep track of that too. It’s not just our government that’s figured out how to tax everything. This region was ruled by Herod Antipas who increased taxation to support his luxurious lifestyle. Fishing licenses were required for access to the best areas. Fish processors and distributors had to pay taxes and there were tolls to transport salted fish. This was a complicated enterprise. Peter and Andrew may represent themselves as simple fisherman, but there was nothing simple about them. These were experienced and hard-working professionals in their field, and Jesus had clearly been watching them, just as they had been watching him.

Our story begins in the morning. Jesus was standing by the lake teaching and saw two boats at the water's edge. The exhausted fisherman to whom they belonged were washing their nets. Jesus knew who these men were, so he helped himself, got into Peter's boat and asked to be put out a little from the shore so he could teach. There were two reasons for this. First, teachers at that time did not traditionally stand to teach, they sat. Second, the sea of Galilee itself lay in a bowl and being out on the water would amplify Jesus' voice. Peter must have been tired, but he did what Jesus asked.

When Jesus finished teaching, he asked Simon Peter to put the boat out again into the deep water and let the nets down for a catch. This was pure insanity. First of all, the entire night had been a bust. They had worked hard and caught nothing. Second, it was daytime and the fish, if there were any, would see the net a mile away and avoid it. Jesus was not a fisherman. He clearly didn't know what he was talking about. Peter would have been well within his rights to tell him where to stick that idea and go home. But he didn't. There was *something* about Jesus. So instead, Peter answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets." And they proceeded to catch such a large haul of fish that they had to call other boats for help. There were so many fish the nets were breaking. There were so many, the boats were sinking.

Presumably once they got to shore, the full import of what had just happened hit Peter between the eyes. He fell at Jesus' knees saying, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" This is the response of a man who knows that he is in the presence of God. It is the same type of reaction Isaiah had centuries earlier when he proclaimed, "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty." Both found themselves overwhelmed by an awareness of their own unholy state. The contrast between God's nature and their own was too painful and acute.

Jesus' response was, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." Many of us know the song from childhood that goes "fishers of men, fishers of men." But the actual word does refer to men and women, so people is a good translation. And the word used for "catch" was commonly used to mean "capturing alive." Even so, the analogy has its limits. Clearly it fit these circumstances but we can't push it too far. Bringing the good news of Jesus to people is not the same thing as capturing them. It is the Holy Spirit who "catches" people in the net of God's love drawing them back to God. We are captured to life, not death.

The disciples pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed Jesus. Of course, even this is an over- simplification of what happened. But Luke's account is the only story of the call of the first disciples that gives us a context at all. The other gospels are abrupt. Jesus calls, and they abandon everything to follow him. But we know that's not how life works. They had to have known who Jesus was in order to leave everything to follow him. They had to have experienced God working through Jesus in order to abandon their whole way of life. These were very successful men. And we have no idea how they provided for their families when they did go and follow Jesus, unless they

hired men to take their place. Following God does not mean allowing your family to starve. It does not mean causing harm to people who inconveniently happen to be dependent upon us for survival. Nonetheless, the decision to follow Jesus was costly. Overnight the lives of these men changed completely.

Peter and Andrew, James and John, had a lot to lose. They weren't just standing around with nothing better to do until Jesus called. They were busy people. They were successful men, prosperous in comparison to many. They were hard-working and skilled. Their families ran successful small businesses. They were intelligent, able to navigate all of the trade deals and tax policies of the day. But we don't think about that when we compare them to ourselves. We imagine they had quiet lives, unlike US. We clearly have **way more** to do than they did. We forget that these fishermen had parents, spouses, siblings, children, nieces and nephews. They had a network of relationships and responsibilities, possibly even more demanding than ours because there was no social safety net. We think we are too busy and our lives are too complex, but their lives make ours look like a vacation.

God calls each and every one of us to serve the kingdom, to extend God's nets of love and draw in the wounded and the lost. God has work for us to do. But our priorities often blind us to God's priorities. Peter and Isaiah's eyes were opened to the deep and terrifying reality of God's presence and it changed them. God does not reveal God's power like this every day, but as I said last week, God does not change. God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. As Christians God may or may not ask us to change our vocation, but God will always ask us to change the direction of our lives. Amen.

Isaiah 6:1-8

6 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. **2** Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. **3** And they were calling to one another:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

4 At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

5 “Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.”

6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. **7** With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

8 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!”

Luke 5:1-11

5 One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. **2** He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. **3** He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

4 When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch."

5 Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

6 When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. **7** So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

8 When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" **9** For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, **10** and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.

Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." **11** So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.