

## The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

Isaiah 6: 1-8

Psalm 138

I Corinthians 15: 1-11

Luke 5: 1-11

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No one in the scriptures seems to feel like they were meant for the job God asked them to do. Not Moses. He hid his face because he was afraid to look at God. And believed he couldn't speak well enough to represent God's words to the people. God told him, "I will give you the words to say and the courage to say them."<sup>1</sup> Last week Jeremiah said, but "I'm only a boy" – God countered with – "don't say that. And don't be afraid because I'll be right there with you."<sup>2</sup> Isaiah's mystical vision of God in the temple, and the awesome glory he saw caused him to tremble and proclaim that "I am a man of unclean lips." He wanted God to leave his presence. But God answered Isaiah's excuse ---- he cleansed Isaiah's unclean lips with a burning coal. Isaiah was ready to answer God's call. God asked "Who will go for us? Isaiah, a newly emboldened man, replies, "Here am I; send me."<sup>3</sup> Even Paul, confident as he was, admits that he is unfit to be called an apostle of Christ.<sup>4</sup> On the lake when Peter is confronted with a miraculous catch of fish, he falls to his knees and begs Jesus to leave him, because he is not worthy. Jesus commands him to not be afraid.<sup>5</sup>

We each have our own personal stash of excuses and feelings of unworthiness, but fear is behind each of them, really. Fear fuels our excuses and nurtures our sense of unworthiness. Nadia Weber-Bolz, a bold Lutheran preacher says, "Fear is the one thing that for sure will get in the way of us hearing what God has to

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 4:12

<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 1: 6-7

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 6:5-8

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:9

<sup>5</sup> Luk3 5:8-10

say.”<sup>6</sup> She suggests that is why “Don’t be afraid” needs to be said so often in encounters with God or God’s angels in the scripture, and why **we** so often need to hear it said.

It seems no one in the scriptures is not afraid. And that no one thinks they are worthy. That whenever God shows up in the story of their lives, they have to be told to not be afraid. Not be afraid of their unworthiness and not to be afraid of God and what God is asking of them. Each person confronted by the living God in our lessons today – Isaiah, Paul, Simon Peter -- has these things in common: a feeling of unworthiness, and fear. Each time we hear how that same scared, inadequate person was strengthened for the purpose God had intended.

God has a habit of taking our excuses, one by one, and replacing them with strength and insight. Just like we read in Psalm 138 this morning – “you have increased my strength within me.”<sup>7</sup>

Ironically if somebody thinks they’re worthy – that is usually the first sign that they’re not! But it’s also just a little bit arrogant, isn’t it, to tell God that God got it wrong when he came knocking on your door.

Jesus told the fishermen to go deeper and put out their nets in the place where Peter *had just fished* for nothing. I’m sure Simon Peter, wanted to say – *Look Jesus. I appreciate your advice, but You stick to carpentry. Don’t tell me how to do my job.* But he didn’t. (Or at least it’s not recorded that he did.) He did as Jesus asked, and was blessed beyond belief with a catch that filled two boats so full we’re told it threatened to sink them.

Jesus was in that boat *with them* as they went deeper. Peter learns that this is not about his catching, but about God’s **providing**. Peter was overwhelmed not only with an overabundance of fish, but with the enormity of God’s presence before him – and told Jesus to leave him alone.

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<sup>6</sup> From her podcast, 1/02/2017

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 138:4

Eugene Petersen in *The Message*, his wonderful paraphrase of scripture hears Peter saying this to Jesus: “ I am a sinner. I can’t handle all this holiness. Leave me to myself, where I know what I am and what I am about.” Peter tried to use his sin as an excuse to NOT be in God’s presence. But Jesus is living, breathing, dying proof that sin is no longer a legitimate excuse.

That was a turning point in the lives of those fishermen. Suddenly their questions changed from “Why would you think I would catch any fish THERE, Jesus?” to “Where are we going to find people with whom to share this enormous abundance?” That question is the foundation of their new lives as fishers of men.

We’re not told what Jesus was preaching to the people from the boat before he decided to help the fisherman. I’d like to think that Jesus was preaching about worthiness and God’s purpose and God’s willingness to provide what they needed to get God’s work done. When Jesus realized his listeners weren’t getting it, he decided to show them. He needed a sermon illustration and found it in the lives of real people doing real things. The people listening saw in the net breaking, boat-sinking catch of fish, that God takes our excuses, our fear and self-doubt and redeems them. God’s abundant grace came alive in real life.

Our collect of the day, the prayer at the beginning of the service, suggests that we need to be released from the bondage of our sins.<sup>8</sup> My understanding of sin has developed over the years --- I’m sure I’ve told you this before --- it’s almost the only thing I can remember verbatim from my years of seminary. My New Testament professor said one day --- *so, you can sin if you want to, but you no longer have to*. Sin in his understanding was whatever **we** kept as a barrier that keeps us from all that God wants us to be. When we not only do but then hold on to things we do wrong, say wrong, are against God’s will, *we not only build but maintain that barrier between us and God. God doesn’t because he has released us from our sinfulness*. Sinfulness, unworthiness are **our** excuses --- which keep us from being all we can be in the kingdom, and keep us from doing all we can do to serve God’s purpose in the world. Because of Jesus’ life and death for our sake, sin has no place in God’s economy of grace. So, don’t spend your time in those

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<sup>8</sup> Book of Common Prayer, p. 216

shallow waters of fear and unworthiness. Don't be afraid of the deep water. Don't be afraid of the God who calls you to explore it. Go deep.

God does not call perfect, fearless people, or invite them to participate in his kingdom. He never has. Because inadequacy, sin and failure are not obstacles to God's call. We must not let them be obstacles to our responding to God.

I'm sure God *would* accept perfect people, because after all, all are welcome, but not even God can't find those people. If God doesn't let your sin, your inadequacy, your fear stand in the way, don't you use them as an excuse. There's really no point in having higher standards than God has.

We are mistaken if we think that God's message of love depends on our worthiness. For none of us, ever, has come to this Table worthy. We all come wounded, frightened, and hungry. None of us is ready to serve God. God alone makes us ready. The word of God we heard today reminds us that sin has never been an excuse which keeps God from lavishing blessing and abundance upon us.

Don't be afraid, people. May you be released from the bondage and arrogance of your sin, that keeps you from accepting all that God offers you and being all that God has called you to be. May God increase the strength within you.