

Rising from Discouragement

Sunday, February 6, 2022

Luke 5:1-11

Rev. Dr. Christopher W. Keating

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In this account, Jesus encounters fishermen who had an unfruitful night on their fishing expedition and who are now cleaning their nets before putting them away. Into this context, where men and women come face to face with their limits and give up, Jesus enters and asks the men to push one of the boats away from the beach.¹

Both scriptures this week are stories of God's people being called to serve. For Isaiah, this call emerges from a moment of ecstatic worship. Isaiah is drawn into the holy mysteries of God, and is suddenly aware of the great distance that exists between God and human beings. This sense of transcendence is mirrored by the way God draws near to Isaiah and blots out his sin, transforming him for ministry.

Something similar occurs in Luke, where Jesus summons the disciples to follow him. Peter witnesses a miraculous catch of fish and suddenly becomes aware of Jesus' power. But Jesus draws near to him, providing encouragement and assurance. He invites Simon and the others to rise from their discouragement and become his disciples.

Following a week of snowstorms and blizzards, we come face to face this morning with the astonishing power, persistence and strength of super champions. Today, our eyes absorb images of awe-inspiring feats, while recalling whiz-bang pyrotechnics couple with breath-taking revelations. And, of course, you can also see the Olympics, not to mention the Super Bowl next week.

But for now, for this morning, our eyes are trained on the amazing works of God as offered in these two super-power texts from Isaiah and Luke. They are both stories of being called, which means they are accounts of the playing fields of life where God encounters human beings. What catches our eyes first in Isaiah is the light show and fireworks, the earthquake and the overwhelming manifestation of God's presence.

On display are supersized images of God's power—God's transcendence – mixed with God's immanence. To draw on a Super Bowl metaphor, Isaiah's call provides the kick-off, while Jesus' call to the disciples involves clenching the final quarter with a surprising interception of a miraculous and net-breaking catch of fish.

Each of these passages reflect both the astonishing transcendence of a God who stands above nature and the incredible immanence of a God who draws close to human life. It is in these experiences that we discover something equally incredible: God calls and equips humans to be part of the work God is doing in the world.

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These passages offers us insights into the way God's power and presence are made manifest in the work. Both evoke a sense of awe and wonder, followed quickly by a staggering sense of unworthiness. Both include God's assurance of peace and hope despite the overwhelming feeling of terror. And in both cases, we might be tempted to say, "If this is what it means to be called by God, could I perhaps pick something a bit less terrifying?"

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don't have to earn it. And I don't even have to like worry that I won't have it - but that maybe the hope is that when we come to the end of ourselves, that we're not alone.²

This is the truth that both Isaiah and Peter discover. For Isaiah, it is the promise that new life will emerge from a decaying stump. For Peter, it is the hope that even though there are nights, and perhaps many nights, when your fishing nets come up empty, you are not alone, and you are called to a deeper, and more holy purpose.

Discovering that purpose is complicated. To use a very Presbyterian-sounding word, discovering that purpose involves discerning how your gifts and the world's needs are melded together. For Peter, all he had ever known was fishing. Fishing was a profitable, but demanding job, and it appears that Peter and his partners had managed to do quite nicely.

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This is as real as it gets. Peter has a job—but right now it feels empty. Isaiah, too, feels a calling, but is emptied by his inner feelings of being unworthy. We, as a church or individuals, may discern that we have an impulse to serve, to use, in the words of another Presbyterian phrase, our gifts of energy, intelligence, imagination and love – but where will that impulse lead us? How does it take shape? How, especially in the blunt realities of discouragement do we keep letting out our nets again and again?

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For Isaiah, answering that call came with the commission to be a prophet. It is a story that holds deeply personal meaning for me. While Isaiah's call is time-stamped “in the year that King Uzziah died,” mine would read “in the second year of college.” Others might hear it differently: “in the year that the Space Shuttle exploded,” or “in the year that I retired,” or “in the year that the pandemic began.” For Peter, it comes in the cycle of everyday work, or as Luke says, “in those days.”

Calls take shape within particular moments of our life's story. The shape of our calls becomes clear as, with Isaiah, we are lifted from our shortcomings and failings, lifted from our limitations, and empowered as Paul says by God's grace to do “far more abundantly than all we ask or think.”

It may even emerge at the moment when we are most exhausted, depleted, or discouraged. “In those days,” Luke says, while he was standing by the lake, Jesus saw two boats and four fishermen. He said to them, “Do not be afraid, from now on you will be catching people.”

It does not mean roping in people with lots of gimmicks and magic or fancy marketing. It does not mean using stunts and spectacles to haul in fish to be consumed. Instead, “catching people” means rescuing

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When we took our family to Disneyworld a couple of years ago, our daughters assumed the role of planning our tours through the Magic Kingdom. Armed with spread sheets and cues from social media, they told us when we had to be at what place and when. One morning they said we had an opening in our schedule, and suggested we wander over to the "Mission Space Ride." As you line up with this ride, there are multiple signs advising you to choose carefully between the "Orange" and "Green" rides. Those looking for something less thrilling are instructed to choose the "Green" ride while those up for more adventure invited to choose "Orange." They tell you this several times, and offer repeated opportunities to decide. Our group decided they were up for Orange—who was I to question the wisdom of my adult children? Afterall, this was Disneyworld—the Happiest Place on Earth!

I'll leave out the details. But I should have chosen Green, which by the way, was the exact color of my complexion when we got back from our trip to Mars.

It is true that call stories are never safe stories. They may be include truths that we need to hear, they may be shaped according to God's providential grace and hope, they are filled with reminders of God unconditional love – but be sure to heed the warnings, because it is certainly going to be bumpy ride. Indeed, when the six-winged seraphim surrounding God call to each other sayin,g "Holy, Holy, Holy is the lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory," what they are actually saying is "Let's get ready to rumble."

But call stories are also stories that raise us from the disappointments and struggles of life. Call stories remind us of the God who yearns to be in relationship with us – the God who comes to us not only in the high and holy moments of worship that Isaiah experiences, but also in the dank, dirty and draining frustrations of working hard and coming up with nothing.

Kate Bowler, who teaches at Duke Divinity School, has written two extraordinary books on her experiences of being a young mother living with incurable cancer. One of her books is called "Everything Happens for a Reason, and Other Lies I've Loved," and the more recent is "No Cure for Being Human (and other truths I need to hear)" Both are excellent and well written and explore what it means to find hope and faith in the face of terminal illness. She writes of the hurdles of disappointment and frustration, pointing out how quickly our contemporary theology tends to dismiss these events as simply the by-product of not having enough faith.

It's hard, she notes, to give up on the idea that we are just humans, and that letting go of the image of that a beautiful, perfect, and perfected life can always be achieved. In an interview, Bowler said,

...I gave up most of the spiritual cliches, I think - that every good thing was going to come back to me or that I could be, you know, the architect of my own life. But one of the only certainties I actually truly latched onto was the sense that in the worst moments that there can be an unbidden God and that I

don't have to earn it. And I don't even have to like worry that I won't have it - but that maybe the hope is that when we come to the end of ourselves, that we're not alone.²

This is the truth that both Isaiah and Peter discover. For Isaiah, it is the promise that new life will emerge from a decaying stump. For Peter, it is the hope that even though there are nights, and perhaps many nights, when your fishing nets come up empty, you are not alone, and you are called to a deeper, and more holy purpose.

Discovering that purpose is complicated. To use a very Presbyterian-sounding word, discovering that purpose involves discerning how your gifts and the world's needs are melded together. For Peter, all he had ever known was fishing. Fishing was a profitable, but demanding job, and it appears that Peter and his partners had managed to do quite nicely.

Fishermen work all night, and if lucky might haul in half a ton or more of fish by morning. Morning would bring its own routines of preparing the fish for market and cleaning the nets. Fishing was no lazy day by the side of the lake, but a constant cycle of casting nets into the sea.

On the day Jesus wanders by, their nets are empty. Empty nets mean nothing to sell, and nothing to earn. The air of disappointment rose like the aroma of stinking fish.

This is as real as it gets. Peter has a job—but right now it feels empty. Isaiah, too, feels a calling, but is emptied by his inner feelings of being unworthy. We, as a church or individuals, may discern that we have an impulse to serve, to use, in the words of another Presbyterian phrase, our gifts of energy, intelligence, imagination and love – but where will that impulse lead us? How does it take shape? How, especially in the blunt realities of discouragement do we keep letting out our nets again and again?

With Isaiah, we may feel moved to cry out, “Here am I, send me!” but we are also quick to add, “But send me to Florida, or at least to a place with a warm beach.”

For Isaiah, answering that call came with the commission to be a prophet. It is a story that holds deeply personal meaning for me. While Isaiah's call is time-stamped “in the year that King Uzziah died,” mine would read “in the second year of college.” Others might hear it differently: “in the year that the Space Shuttle exploded,” or “in the year that I retired,” or “in the year that the pandemic began.” For Peter, it comes in the cycle of everyday work, or as Luke says, “in those days.”

Calls take shape within particular moments of our life's story. The shape of our calls becomes clear as, with Isaiah, we are lifted from our shortcomings and failings, lifted from our limitations, and empowered as Paul says by God's grace to do “far more abundantly than all we ask or think.”

It may even emerge at the moment when we are most exhausted, depleted, or discouraged. “In those days,” Luke says, while he was standing by the lake, Jesus saw two boats and four fishermen. He said to them, “Do not be afraid, from now on you will be catching people.”

It does not mean roping in people with lots of gimmicks and magic or fancy marketing. It does not mean using stunts and spectacles to haul in fish to be consumed. Instead, “catching people” means rescuing

² <https://www.npr.org/2018/02/12/585066841/a-stage-4-cancer-patient-shares-the-pain-and-clarity-of-living-scan-to-scan>

those who are in peril of perishing.” Jesus is not calling Peter to cast out nets, but is instead equipping the church to share the good news.

Jesus calls us, not to an enterprise of wrangling people into a program, but to rise from our discouragement so that we can walk with those who still struggle, whose lives are burdened, who yearn for the words of Christ: “do not be afraid.” Amen.