

5th Sunday of Epiphany
Sermon 2.9.25

Isaiah 6:1-8

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!'

Luke 5:1-11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who are partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." (469)

I was trained in Godly Play late in 2006, when Jack was six months old and Tobias was three years old.

Godly Play is the Montessori-based method for teaching stories from the Bible to Sunday School children. Developed by an Episcopal priest who was also a Montessori teacher, Godly Play would emphasize the prepared space, a room prepared for children to engage in their serious work of play. A prepared space: like when the sanctuary has been made ready for you to come to worship or the parlor is set for coffee hour, like when a nursery has been made ready for a newborn to come home or when a backyard has been made ready for a birthday party, there's a gift implied in that readiness. Someone has imagined *you* and prepared a space for *you*, set a table for you. Someone has anticipated your arrival. You've been looked forward to.

Godly Play would also encourage the story-teller to handle the pieces of the story with care, moving them around the story space with attentive reverence. The telling isn't to engage the teller with the hearer, something more of personality than story. The teller is to engage the pieces themselves, the teller's attention focused on them so the hearer's attention can be focused on them and moreover their imagination is free to roam. It all endows the pieces with a certain vitality, ordains them almost with life or at least the reverence that the living deserve.

At the two-day training, on the evening between the days, we were encouraged to bring a story home to play with. I think I brought the Creation story home, the seven cards that span from "In the beginning" to the day of rest.

I sat down on the floor of my living room with it, settled into the practice. At some point in the telling, Tobias toddled in and sat down on the other side of the story, taken not with me but with the story.

When I was finished the telling he asked me, "Can I touch these things?" laying his hands out flat above the spanned cards, not touching but wanting to.

"Yes," I answered, knowing that's exactly what they're for. In fact, it's often there in the script, the note to be said that these are things for you to work with as you like, always available in the Godly Play classroom. These are things for you to play with as you like, put together as the story says they're to be or put together as you would do it. When we hear a story in worship, that's only a small part of what's to happen in a Godly Play classroom. The teacher will tell a story but then the children are given time to explore, to choose a story to play with, and to play with it however it comes to them to do.

Tobias moved the cards around as he saw fit, a line of thinking I couldn't follow, his three-year old mind largely a mystery to me. But he handled the cards with deliberation, a careful kid but here taking even more care than usual. His rapt attention on, and now reverent desire for, these things were surprising to me and moving to me. There was a power being communicated here. It was compelling and it inspired care, making clear the heart and aim of the method.

I hope I never forget the reverence, his asking, "Can I touch these things?"

Something happens when you're in the presence of the important, the powerful. There's a humility that comes, a humble self-awareness. There's even, apparently, a need to confess: "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man."

Why did he say this, Simon Peter? It wasn't particularly true. Simon Peter wasn't a particularly sinful man, not from what I can tell anyway.

Not that we can tell much about him by this point in the story, having come as he did into the story un-introduced. He's mentioned as if everyone would already know: oh, Simon Peter! The first we hear of him, Jesus has gone to Simon's mother-in-law's house—you know the one—because she was sick and needed healing. Next comes this, when Jesus steps into Simon Peter's boat—you know the one—in order better to be heard for teaching the crowds. These had gathered around Jesus on his travels in and around Capernaum, and to Nazareth and then back again. From the boat just off the shore—Simon Peter's boat, you know the one—he could better be heard to those on shore.

It was Peter's boat he used.

And maybe you don't know, which is fine. Peter would become crucial in the story. Peter, one of the twelve disciples: he would come to hold the keys of the kingdom (the kingdom of God), would come to be the rock on which Jesus would build his church. He would do so by being deeply imperfect, arguably not up to the task. He often failed to understand. He once struck out in violence. He rejected (at first) the imperative that Jesus should die on a cross. Simon Peter—you know the one. Not up to the task, and yet very much what Jesus needed, very much someone God could put to good purpose nonetheless.

God—you know the one.

This is the call of the disciples according to Luke. This is the point in the gospel story when Jesus gathers disciples meant not only to be students disciplined in the Jesus way but also ones sent out as apostles to gather in others. Fishing for people, it's often put, thanks to the fact that the ones Jesus calls are fishermen, and the site of the call is when they're at their boats tending to their nets and, according to Luke, coming off a night of catching nothing and suddenly dealing with so great a catch they can barely manage it.

It's not an uncomplicated analogy, fishers of men, fishers of people. Though it might have made easy sense to those early fishermen-disciples, it's not an analogy that ages well. After all, who among us wants to be thought of as fish caught in a net? And who among us would want to bear our faith unto others with the aim of capturing them into a net from which they cannot get loose and following which they'd be put to purposes other than their own? Someone else's dinner: that's what fish in a net are to be.

As for how it's played out, there are religious groups that seem to regard others as targets for capture, and there are religious leaders who set their followers to that task. The church, however: the church is not to be what today we'd call a cult.

No, it's not an uncomplicated analogy.

It's also not one Jesus was making without nuance. New Testament scholar Elisabeth Johnson points this out: "The Greek word for 'catching' used here (zogron) is rare in the New Testament...[It] means 'to catch alive.' Of course, fishing with nets was a matter of catching fish alive, but those live fish would soon be dead. Here Jesus calls Simon and his partners to a new vocation of catching people so that they might live, a life-giving vocation of being caught up in God's mission of salvation for all."

This word choice on Jesus' part according to Luke might free the analogy from its more troubling aspects. It also might encourage us not to read too much into it all, rather to watch Jesus as he encounters people along the way. He seems uninterested in capturing anyone. He seems uninterested in coercing or strong-arming or manipulating and deceiving anyone into following him, making it so they can't even leave. Rather, he teaches and heals and regards and respects. He tells the truth, he indeed is truth, and (turns out) people find that appealing.

If also revealing: the truth:

"Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man."

Peter's response to his proximity to goodness and truth, to life-giving power manifest in an abounding catch of net-straining numbers of fish ("Get away from me, Lord...") doesn't say anything particular about him. There's nothing about Peter that seems particularly sinful, particularly off the mark that would have him so confess, just as there apparently wasn't with Isaiah, the prophet from several centuries earlier.

This was when King Uzziah had died and the nations Judah and Israel had begun to wobble. No longer stable, they were yet 200 years from being overcome by Babylon, a two-centuries long slide into ruin that was somewhat self-inflicted.

You know how it goes. You know what that feels like. History unfolding right under your feet: you can see it coming, you can *feel* it coming, you feel see *how* it's coming, a series of actions and reactions, but you can't seem to stop its coming.

Unraveling.

Eventual ruin.

Amidst the ruin: it was then that Isaiah saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe filling 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 house filled with smoke, and Isaiah was just standing there. Eventually he 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!” See, because the holy arrives and the earthly, nakedly so, feels suddenly ugly. The godly arrives and the ordinary, stripped and plain, newly revealed, says, “Oh, no. Woe is me.”

Or it *should*. That’s how the holy *should* make us feel.

There’s a question out there live today, does our politics give preference to sociopaths, or at least sociopathic behavior?

I have been distressed to watch Elon Musk dismantle the federal government. I imagine I’m not alone among us: distressed and enraged and made deeply, deeply sad. His rough handling of the structures of our life together as a society offends me. His doing so out of bounds, with no governmental authority, is criminal, of course, a coup that the courts might eventually catch up with. It calls to mind how Sarah Palin described her process of responding to John McCain when he asked her to be his vice-presidential running mate. “I didn’t hesitate, no,” she said to Charlie Gibson of ABC News. He asked if that didn’t take some hubris. “I answered him yes,” Ms. Palin said, “because I have the confidence in that readiness and knowing that you can’t blink, you have to be wired in a way of being so committed to the mission, the mission that we’re on, reform of this country and victory in the war, you can’t blink. So, I didn’t blink then even when asked to run as his running mate.”

But, see, you should blink. You should take a moment and consider yourself, question whether you can do it, this important thing that countless others would entrust you with, others who count on that which you’re handling, others who live precarious lives and who can only barely manage to make it through the day, because they’re impoverished or they’re unwell or they’re children or they’re elderly or they’re a tentpole around which a smaller society has formed, on whom others still less well-resourced depend.

I had the weird experience of being in New Hampshire when that earthquake hit in York Maine, just over the border. I was in the public library in Exeter, a library that’s been housed in its current location since the late 80s. It’s a modern building, set into the river bank and made level by being built on posts, a portion of it built over what would be parking underneath. I was working on a piece of writing in the reading room when the quake happened, shaking the building, making everyone take notice.

New England is fairly settled land; earthquakes here are uncommon and, when they happen, often so mild as to go unnoticed. Not this one.

But my first thought wasn't that there'd been an earthquake. No, my first thought was that someone had driven their car into one of those posts and done so intentionally: a domestic terrorist attack, and one to strike at the literal foundation of our literal public life. It's an interesting first thought to explain something unexpected and unmistakable. I don't think I'd have thought that five years ago.

Things have changed.

I imagine we all feel very disempowered. There is very little most of us can do about the rough handling of crucial things that hold up our society—until they don't. But there will be *something* we can do. There will arrive moments here and there when we can do something, offer kindness and consideration, speak the truth when encountered with politically motivated lies, remain faithful when all hell breaks loose.

When those occasions come, take a moment. Don't just blink but gather yourself. Pray. Collect your courage and cleanse yourself of what's unclean—hatred and wrath and fear and cowardice and vengeance. People are taking apart, or absolutely wrecking, complex structures built to deliver social care. And, yes, delivered not always efficiently: this is true. And delivered often tinged with corruption: this also is true. But which on the whole make us better rather than worse.

There is an undoing on a scale as of yet unknown—and the text for giving context here isn't the newspaper or even a history book but might well the Bible, this book that is wild and itself spans centuries and is often inconsistent but is fairly consistent in this: the sorts of people made powerful for God's work are people like us, not terribly promising, not set up on pinnacles political highpoints but people woven into the warp and weft of regular life but arrived in a moment when something important comes to be done.

Meet that moment. Ask permission of the Lord your God: "Can I touch these things?" And then do the works of love: "Here I am. Send me."

Thanks be to God.

Here am I. Send me.