5th Sunday of Epiphany
Sermon 2.6.22

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." (256)

There's that scene in one of my favorite movies, *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*–not the best title for a movie, but a good movie. And that scene, when Gilbert's new friend, a girl, a young woman, at last meets Gilbert's mother, obese to the degree that she can't, without huge effort, leave her bed anymore so doesn't even bother to try. They're in her bedroom, and she's sitting on the edge of her bed, trying to heave herself onto her own feet.

Gilbert had been insisting that she meet his new friend.

She'd insisted that she not be made to, that she's happy for Gilbert and that should be enough.

If she wouldn't come out, Gilbert would bring his new friend in.

This would be a violation to his mother.

She was distraught at the possibility.

Finally, Gilbert comes in with his friend, maybe soon his girlfriend. Slender, free-spirited, she's passing through town with her grandmother in their camper, but they've had engine-trouble and it's delayed their leaving.

She comes into the worn house, comes up the creaking stairs, comes into the room.

Gilbert's mother looks up, just her eyes, not her face. She confesses, "I haven't always been like this."

The girl hesitates. "I haven't always been like *this.*"

There's nothing like a brush with someone better than you to make you feel like you've really failed.

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

What are those brushes for you?

Simon Peter comes into the story unintroduced, mentioned as if everyone would already know: oh, Simon Peter! The first we hear of him, when Jesus goes to Simon's mother-in-law's house—you know the one—because she's sick and needs 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 him 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.

The gospel narratives are often this way. They're told to a people who already largely know how the story would go. Each of our writers, writing for specific communities, don't seem to feel the need to contextualize so much, which leads us to the conclusion that they're writing for communities familiar to them, familiar among themselves, and familiar with the story and its cultural and geographical contexts. It's as if these stories are less to inform than to remind, to recall, to encourage that most Judeo-Christian of activities, to remember.

They continue to have that effect these days, though they speak of events we don't remember in their happening, and don't have parents or grandparents who remember in their happening. Two thousand years out, the best we can hope for is to have been so steeped in these stories we don't remember not knowing them, we don't remember the first time we heard them. They just dawn in our minds like the dawn itself.

What is the exact moment when the sun has "risen," as if the sun moves at all?

Do you remember the first time you ever heard of Jesus?

Do you remember the first time you ever heard of Peter?

If so, don't get too stressed; if *now* is the first time, please don't worry. You're among growing numbers. You're simply one who grew up amidst this social experiment we're two or three generations into now. It began, I'd say, with mine, Generation X, this unmooring from our tradition of the sacred.

Posit: ours is, in many ways, a culture rooted in what's come to be called the Judeo-Christian heritage, which I know has been misimagined and misconstrued, put to purposes

recently that can only be called Christian Nationalism, which is ugly indeed, a perversion of our cultural inheritance. But, prior even to now, this heritage has played out badly for many of the cultures it's invaded either by force or by coercion or by syncretism. I'm not meaning to champion this. With all these things noted, though, it's also worth noting that there's tremendous wealth in the tradition we remember this morning—and it's largely being turned away from or has already largely been so.

I watched the movie made to stream on TV, *The Lost Daughter*, which is brilliant and intense and a little slow and sometimes a bit boring. It's stunning and I recommend it.

Something of a puzzle, it gains sense in its biblical themes give it sense. Undergirding the whole story is a resort called paradise, a bowl of spoiled fruit, several mentions of a snake, a mother long amidst the terrible pangs of birth and motherhood who is herself a lost daughter and who eventually suffers an inflicted wound to her side akin to Christ's wounding before his crucifixion, following which she seems to have died and is reborn and apparently now redeemed, her broken relationships largely healed or at least revealed as okay, everything would be okay.

I loved it, of course, because symbolism always has me all in, and biblical symbolism is to its epitome. But it also struck me as a little heavy handed. These images from scripture poured on as thick as I pour maple syrup onto pancakes, I thought people in discussing this much discussed movie would be using the phrase "on the nose" a lot.

But no one did. Astonishing, dismaying, none of the many think-pieces I've read or listened to when they've come out as podcasts have seemed to have any awareness of these themes at all. They've had questions though, and they're mainly of this sort: "Huh?" And "What did that ending mean?" And "What on earth happened?"

How far we've drifted from our culture's own underpinnings.

It worries me. It dispirits me that many and growing are the readers who'll read this story and wonder, though probably afraid to ask, "Wait, who's the guy who owns this boat? Why didn't this book take a moment to introduce him?" though there are treasures more than this lost to our ignoring them.

It's Simon Peter, the man who would become the disciple closest to Jesus—there at the Transfiguration, there at the trial though if only to deny having known Jesus, there at the crucifixion and an early arrival to the empty tomb, there at the ascension, and there must crucially at the birth and early days of the church, indeed the rock on which Jesus would build his church.

It would be quite a turn given that here, at this moment, Peter feels sure Jesus needs to get away from him because he is a sinful man.

There's no indication that he actually is. There's no indication that he's noteworthy for his sinfulness. Likely, he's no worse than anyone else, he's no worse than any of us. He just suddenly *feels* this way—and he's either worried that his sinfulness puts Jesus, now so close, at risk of being polluted by him, or he's cognizant that its Jesus' closeness to so suddenly now cast in full relief how utterly ugly and disappointing Peter must certainly be.

There's nothing like a brush with someone better than you to make you feel really lousy.

What are those brushes for you?

It's not an uncommon thing in scripture that the arrival of the holy makes the mundane feel lousy. It's not an uncommon thing among our three lections this morning that the arrival of the holy makes the ordinary say, essentially, "Oh, come *on*." Isaiah the prophet, Paul the writer of the epistle, Peter in the gospel all have it slammed home, too many to read this morning (a listener can only take in so many words), too good though not to hear about.

The prophetic text recalls this not-yet prophet receiving the call. King Uzziah had died, and the nations Judah and Israel would begin 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* its 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.

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 sh…oot."

You've got to recover from this. You've got to re-*cover*. Think about that word: you've been stripped, something's been fully revealed, and you've got to re-*cover,* to put yourself back together, a dimmer light, a softer focus, maybe a soft pair of sweatpants and a fuzzy blanket on a big couch.

Isaiah got something more intense than that. No recovery for him, he got redemption, a coal touched to his lips, a sort of redeeming fire by which the unclean would be refined away.

Now he was ready to speak for the Lord. Moreover, having suffered and survived, he was ready to speak things that no one would want to hear said—that the people would suffer too, that the Lord wouldn't intervene on their behalf, would rather prolong their blindness to the truth, would prolong their lack of understanding of themselves and their Lord, would prevent even their turning so to be healed until their cities were laid waste, without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land utterly desolate. This slide into chaos and ruin: the Lord would allow it. The Lord was behind it, was also ahead of it because,

following ruin,

a felling of everything until all was stump,

then,

then,

in the stump would be a holy seed.

There's a lot here to consider, not least the faithful conviction that history is providential of God even when history seems to turn against you. Even then, when calamity strikes and unraveling occurs, God is somehow at work amidst that too. Truly, God can withdraw as much as God can arrive. And if you don't believe that because you've never experienced that then it might be God you have to thank for that, or it might be that your confidence tends too much toward the triumphant.

America, I'm talking to you.

But that's a sermon for another time, if I'm half as courageous a preacher as I think I am.

As for the topic at hand, Paul said it, too, in his letter to the church in Corinth. It had become apparent that the Corinthians had come less to feel Paul as authoritative, as trustworthy.

He would argue his continued merit, which had him first confessing his also unworthiness. He was the least of all the apostles. He had brutally "persecuted the church of God."

But Jesus Resurrected came to him, and thus Paul came himself to understand the power of God's grace, the surprising power of God's love, that his past and the truth of himself were, like

all our faults—piled high though they might be, crammed into the darkest corner of the deepest closet of our souls though they might be—to come to nothing for the love in God's sight.

With hardly a breath between his admission of his own ugliness, Paul continued, "But by the grace of God I am what I am…" And who knows whether the creators of Popeye knew they were cribbing from the Apostle Paul: "I am what I am," and can't you just see the shrug of his shoulders, the throwing up of his hands.

We are what we are, and there's often not much we can do about it—though there often is, at least something, and so we should, at least try. We've got to develop our humanness. Being human is an art. If first a fact, it is also an art.

We do it with God's grace.

We do it *by* God's grace.

What are you working on these days? And what have you accepted about yourself as just the way it is?

If all this is true, that an encounter with the holy can make the mundane feel lousy, that an encounter with beauty can cast in fuller relief what is sort of ugly, then it's no wonder our culture is unmooring itself from all this. Really, a headlong pursuit of the ugliness we seem to be pursuing, especially recently seem to be furiously pursuing, will refuse an encounter with truth and beauty and the quiet enduring, for such an encounter will be the undoing of the ugliness. It's as if we'd rather fight one another, fight even to the death, than be moved to say anything like, "Woe is me."

Which indicates something unusual about you for stopping into this moment to pause from that ugly pursuit, to seek sanctuary though amidst burning redemption.

Do you dare?

If so, rest assured, past your defense is utter love. Below your shame is *utter love*, undergirding everything though we've become unmoored. And amidst that utter love is the voice of God, saying, "I'm going to need your help."

You can do it.

We can do it.

Thanks be to God.