

SECOND READING: Luke 5:1-11

pg 62 NT

Once while Jesus^[a] was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, ²he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³He 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. ⁴When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." ⁵Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." ⁶When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. ⁷So 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. ⁸But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" ⁹For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; ¹⁰and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon.

Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." ¹¹When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

This is the word of the Lord... THANKS BE TO GOD.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 6:1-8

pg 634 OT

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. ²Seraphs 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. ³And one called to another and said:

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory."

⁴The pivots^[a] on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵And 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!"

⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷The seraph^[b] touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." ⁸Then 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!"

This is the word of the Lord... THANKS BE TO GOD

“Encountering the Holy”

A good piece of advice is that when reading Scripture it is best to pay attention to what sticks out to you! Notice what grabs you. Focus on the details that you instantly love or that really peak your curiosity. Because at those places of great joy and challenge you’ll most often find the Spirit speaking to you.¹ This is easy advice to take as we read the wonderful and very familiar story in the 5th chapter of Luke today because there are lots of details to love and many some which really challenge us.

On first glance, the text appears to be a fishing story. Jesus was standing beside the Lake of Gennesaret, which is also known as the Sea of Galilee. People were pressing in on him, eager to hear what he might say. Several fishermen were there and they were cleaning their nets after a night of unproductive fishing. One was Simon, also known as Peter. Jesus commandeered his boat, and used it as a kind of pulpit to address the crowd. From the text prior to this in Luke’s Gospel, we are aware that Peter had interacted with Jesus before. Not only had he witnessed Jesus teach and preach and heal around Galilee, but Peter had invited Jesus to his house to heal his own mother-in-law! We don’t know what Jesus said that day as he taught the people, but when he was done, Jesus told Peter to set out once again to go fishing in the deep waters. Likely at this point all Peter wanted to do was go home and get a meal and go to bed. But Peter for some reason, agreed. He said, *“Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.”* And, to his astonishment and joy, once he did, the miracle occurred...his catch was more fish than his boat and his partners’ boats could hold! Amazing. But this is where we’re given a very wonderful detail. Peter said, *“Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”* In some versions, the words are, *“Depart from me”*. He didn’t say, *“How did you do that?”* or *“Would you consider being part of our fishing team?”*² No, he said, *“Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”*

Why? Why did Peter say that? What was Luke’s purpose in lifting this up? Could it be....could it be that what this story is about is not fishing at all, no, and not even really so

¹David Lose. *“Epiphany 5C: “Lots to Love”* <http://www.davidlose.net/2019/02/epiphany-5-c-lots-to-love/> (accessed 2/7/19).

² John Buchanan. *“Reverence”* <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2004/020804.html> (accessed 2/7/19).

much about Jesus' miracle, but about...the human response to finding oneself in a thin place... what the ancient Celts described as a place where the distance between heaven and earth collapses and we're able to catch glimpses of the Divine?"³ Could this story be about the human response to encountering the Mysterious, the Other, the Sacred, the Holy?"

Well, I am convinced that it is. I am convinced that we are given this detail by Luke, the physician Gospel writer, to remind us that when we humans catch a glimpse of God's majesty, purity, and holiness, when we see even the faintest glimmer of the awesome splendor and righteousness of God, then our vision goes cloudy and we become aware of the extent of our own sinfulness. We are struck by how much more we've received than we deserve. We are held captive by the fact that we are caught up in something so much bigger than ourselves. And it can be a response that is so intensely humbling and powerful that it borders on fear, even terror.

In the first reading today, when in his vision or dream Isaiah found himself in the throne room of God, his immediate response was, "*Woe is me! I am lost...yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts*". The angelic beings covered their eyes. Isaiah and other prophets of the Old Testament like Habakkuk affirmed the dilemma: "*We have a holy God, you and I, whose image we bear and whose image it is our fundamental responsibility to mirror, yet we are not holy. We are fearfully far from holy.*"⁴ After being overwhelmed in the presence of the miracle worker, Peter said, "*Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!*"

This humble inadequacy before God is a critically important thing...something so critically important that we cannot even begin to worship without first accepting it. As Rev. John Buchanan so beautifully states, without our humble reverence, not only is our Creator God cheapened and demeaned but so is our God-given life cheapened and demeaned.⁵ He quotes the late great Rabbi Abraham Heschel who said, "*To become aware of the ineffable is to part company with words. . . . What is extraordinary appears to us as habit, the dawn a daily routine*

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/travel/thin-places-where-we-are-jolted-out-of-old-ways-of-seeing-the-world.html>. (accessed 2/7/19).

⁴ From R, C, Sproul <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/holiness-god-and-sinfulness-man/> (accessed 2/7/19).

⁵ John Buchanan. "Reverence" <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2004/020804.html>. (accessed 2/7/19).

of nature. . . . But time and time again we awake. In the midst of walking in the never-ending procession of days and nights, we are SUDDENLY filled with a solemn terror, and a feeling of our wisdom being inferior to the dust from which we were made. We cannot endure the heartbreaking splendor of sunsets... We must beware lest we violate the holy, lest our dogmas overtake the mystery."⁶ "We must beware lest we violate the holy, lest our dogmas overtake the mystery." For this reason, our Presbyterian Order of Worship each week begins with hymns of adoration and praise, and our proclamation of God's holiness is followed quickly by our humble confession of sin, both personal and corporate. By doing this, we symbolically enter into God's presence, recognizing God's hallowed and awesome position and our limited and flawed one. We do this before further words can be said or sung.⁷ (Did you know this?)

Yes, it is an important detail to notice what Peter said to Jesus. But it is an equally important detail to note what Jesus said in response. Ah, Jesus did not say, "*Ok...I'll go away from you if you want. I will depart.*" He didn't even address Peter's plea for forgiveness, which is odd since Jesus forgives sin, but here we see Jesus offering more. Jesus said, "*Do not fear*". He said, "*Do not fear*". Neither Peter's sinfulness nor even his SENSE of sinfulness was cause for separation from Jesus. Rather, Jesus stayed with Peter. He received him ever so gently with these comforting words, with these gracious, encouraging words which are said so often in the Bible, especially in the Gospels. They were said to Mary when she was to have a son name Jesus and to the shepherds who watched their flocks by night. They were said by Jesus to the throng listening to him deliver his sermon on the Mount, and by angels to the women who arrived early on that first Easter morning. They were said so often that it seems that Jesus came so that we don't have to be afraid anymore.⁸ I love that. "*Do not fear*".

And when Peter heard these words, they had their effect. They cleared the way for him to say "yes" when he was then asked to "*Come, and fish for people*". He had already encountered the Holy. He'd seen fully his inadequacy in the presence of the boundless ability of Jesus. And

⁶ Abraham Heschel. "*I Asked for Wonder*" (NY:Crossroad Pub; 1983)3-5.

⁷ John Buchanan and my personal favorite comment re Reformed worship.

⁸ David Lose.

he knew he would enter now into a new life that was so tightly bound to Jesus, to the One in front of whom no evil or fear could stand, that he had no reason to say “no”. These words would go with him as he would leave his family and friends, his trade and livelihood, his home. These words would go with him when he would preach to thousands, heal and baptize, and carry the Gospel into unwelcoming places. They would ring in his ears as would be thrown in prison and as he would face his own crucifixion.⁹ *Long pause*

These are the details for us to hear this morning, brothers and sisters, details which jump out to capture our curiosity and our hearts. The Holy One we encounter in the places where the membrane between earth and heaven is so thin...the Mysterious One who creates those “heartbreaking sunsets”, who is in the pungent smell of the air after an electrical storm, in the quiet stillness of a clear winter’s night, and the damp of the morning’s dew....the Mighty one who is in cry of a little bitty baby, and the fiery passion of a young couple’s love, in the free laughter of children playing, in the smell of fresh coffee brewing on a cold morning ...this Infinite One before whom we can do nothing but fall on our knees for we are so puny and finite has called us to “follow him”. He has called us “follow him”. He has called us, and the job is not easy, but he has also come to tell us, no, not just to tell us, but to show us too that we need not be afraid. He has stretched out his arms and shown us, “*Do not be afraid*”. And this has, as it did for Peter, and all other disciples before us, cleared the way for our hearts to say “yes”.

William Sloan Coffin says this... “*the miraculous catch was not the haddock and shad and whatever else Peter and the rest of them caught that day, but the fact that Peter and rest were caught up, even as we are, in the net of Christ’s love.*”¹⁰ Yes, friends, the miracle in the story is in the details. It is in the fact that Peter and rest and we too, are caught up in the net of Christ’s love. *Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.*
Amen.

⁹ Hubert Beck. “Do Not Be Afraid”. <http://www.theologie.zh.ch/predigten/archiv-9/070204-9-e.html> (accessed 2/8/19).

¹⁰ William S. Coffin. “Life is a Gift”. In: *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin e Riverside Years, Vol 2* (Louisville: WJKP; 2008), 232.