

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C (RCL)

Getting the Word Out

Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 138; I Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

What would you do if Jesus walked up to you and called you by name? Or what if you suddenly found yourself standing in the middle of God's throne room, with cherubim and seraphim flying around and smoke everywhere?

When you hear the kinds of stories we have just heard, what do you make of them? What are you supposed to do with them today, or next week? They have been preserved for centuries, you know, precisely so that *you* could hear them this morning, so that you could carry them home with you and ponder them, so that you could discover how very much God desires to be present to you—did you know that? And beyond that, as that discovery sinks in and begins to change your life, God has work for you to do. My job, and the job of my colleagues who share this pulpit, is to keep reminding you of the Bible's message of God's persistent love. We hold that message up for you, we encourage you to take it seriously, and (if you want to include us) we stand ready to pray and discuss with you where you think it may lead you, here in the parish and far out in the wider world.

One of the few things I'm sure enough about to preach—and I'm absolutely sure of this—is that God loves each one of us absolutely, just as we are. I'm absolutely sure that God wants every human being ever born to live this life and the life to come in the loving presence of God. And I'm absolutely sure that God wants our help—not *needs* but *wants* our help—to get the word out that we have a home where we can count on being loved, no matter what.

The question is, do we hear that as good news? Being loved—yes, that's good news, even if it's hard to understand how God could find us lovable. But maybe that's the crux of the matter: if I can bring myself to buy into the incredible good news that God loves me—all of me, good and not-so-good and downright rotten, just exactly as I am—if I really believe that good news, then the fact that I'm called to do something with it is good news, too. But if I *don't* believe it—if I second-guess God and judge myself or others as not good enough for God to love—then living joyfully in God's presence feels impossible and spreading the good news feels burdensome and false. Hear me straight on this: if I don't believe that God is that loving, *I'm the one* who makes the decision that I'm not good enough; *I'm the one* who acts out of that decision and does the things that seem to prove my worthlessness. *God*, on the other hand, holds steadfastly to the truth that I am completely beloved and desired, and God waits patiently for me to come around.

God's grace; my choice. I'm pretty sure I'm on solid ground here, folks, and I'm not making it up. Look at our readings today. They all say the same thing.

Hundreds of years before Christ, the psalmist gives thanks for God's love and faithfulness, full of assurance that “though the Lord be high, he cares for the lowly...” and “will make good his purpose for me; O Lord, your love endures for ever...” The psalmist's heart-felt praise and faithful teaching of God's word will go out into the world and impress even foreign kings, who will also turn to God in faith.

And notice that God is always active in calling people to turn their hearts to God, always on the watch for the faithful soul who is willing to say “yes.” Isaiah lived in a terrible time in Israel—one of a long series of terrible times when the people forgot that God was their God and fell into social injustice and idol-worship—putting other things ahead of God in importance (we do it still). But Isaiah was a man whose heart was turned toward God, listening and open to hear what God was saying to him. And in that openness, he was granted a vision of God’s presence that filled him with fear and doubt until he understood that God forgave him, found him worthy and made him strong to respond in faith: “Here am I; send me!” The word he was to carry to Israel was harsh, actually; the task was difficult, for the people were proud and stubborn. But it was not without hope, because of God’s steadfast, unwavering love that would not let them go.

In the Gospel reading, Luke paints a marvelous picture of the call of Simon Peter and his friends, James and John. It’s late morning on the lakeshore. The fishing boats are pulled up on the beach, and the fishermen are all wearily cleaning up after a rotten night—no catch, no fish, no income, only dirty boats and nets that need work. Jesus comes down to the lake, followed by a huge crowd who have come to hear him speak of God. (He has been teaching all around the region, and has healed the sick and driven out demons. Everything he says and does stands as evidence of the good news of God’s love, and the people can’t get enough of it.) He goes up to Simon Peter, whose mother-in-law is one of those he has healed, and asks for the use of his boat. Sure, says Simon, and they get in and row out a little way so that Jesus can be easily seen and heard by the crowd on shore.

Simon Peter and his crew listen, too, as Jesus teaches the crowd. They have seen something of his power, and his words fill them with hope and joy: God loves them and wants them to hear and respond to that love, to accept it as God’s gift and let it change their lives. Jesus finishes speaking, and after a pause, he turns to Simon Peter and takes him by surprise. “Take the boat out further, into deep water, and let’s see if things have changed for you.”

Simon protests that change is impossible—the past night’s fruitless work is evidence of how little can be done—there’s nothing there to work for. But even as he protests, his heart turns to God, and he makes the effort anyway. They row farther out, they drop the nets over the side . . . and they are almost pulled overboard by the weight of the fish that suddenly fill their nets. James and John row out to help, and both boats are nearly swamped as the fish do everything but leap into the place where Jesus sits and watches.

After working so long and hard with so little success, any normal fisherman should jump for joy at a catch like that. But Simon Peter isn’t your average fisherman. He stands in the boat, breathless with the effort of hauling in the teeming nets, and looks from the wriggling silver pile to the quiet man sitting in the stern. He knows that this is somehow the work of God—that Jesus has brought the power of God into Simon’s little boat—and he is terrified. Falling on his knees in the bottom of the boat, he begs Jesus to leave him alone, for he is not worthy to be in the presence of such power, not worthy of such a gift of grace.

Sounds pretty normal, actually. Wouldn’t you feel the same? I would—I *do*. What kind of nerve does it take to claim to be worthy to look God in the face and accept Jesus as constant companion? Even Paul says he is “unfit to be called an apostle,” and

he's generally pretty nervy about his ability to lead others to Christ. Human beings who have any self-awareness at all usually understand at some level that we are so much lower than God that the idea of worthiness or equality is laughable. As the Collect of the Day suggests, we understand that we are sinful and held like slaves in bondage to our sins.

But Paul has the answer: "By the grace of God I am what I am"—and by the grace of God he, and you and I, are set free from all that. Not slaves any more, sins washed away so thoroughly that even we can't see them any more. God's angel touches Isaiah's mouth with cleansing fire from the altar and declares that he is no longer tainted with sin and guilt. Jesus reaches out to Simon Peter, on his knees in the bottom of the boat, and says, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." By the grace of God, emptied of fear, filled with hope, and on fire with love, Isaiah and Peter and Paul and you and I can get up and get on with the work that God has for us to do.

Catching people . . . it was the work Jesus set Peter to, when they had rowed back to shore and walked off together, leaving all those fish for somebody else to deal with. It was the work Paul took up, taking the good news that had caught him so suddenly it knocked him off his horse, and passing it on to anyone who would stand still long enough to listen.

Catching people . . . are you ready? Evangelism: all the word means is telling good news. Meeting people where they are, hearing their stories, listening for their need—their bad news—and giving them the good news that they are loved and longed for and welcomed home.

Evangelism. It's not a bad word. And for people as smart and capable, as warm and loving as I have found you to be, it's not bad work, either. Peace be to you; do not fear; you shall not die. Let God's love shine in and through you, and from now on you will be catching people and showing them the way home.

Mollie Douglas Turner+
Bruton Parish Episcopal Church, Williamsburg, Virginia
7 February 2010