

“The Good News: Abundant Faith”

Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
Message for February 6, 2022
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The Bible Wisdom Teachings this week align in many ways. Each story provides rich imagery, revelation, the call to discipleship, and examples of abundant faith to an abundant God.

Last week we heard the voice of the prophet, Jeremiah. This week we hear from Isaiah, the prophet whose name means, “God saves.” Let’s try to consider how most of us function in our lives and how differently a prophet understands our purpose in the world.

We have a tendency to separate things and people into secular and sacred. We assume that the secular is what we are more or less in charge of: our jobs, our time, our entertainment, our government, our relationships. The sacred is what God has charge of: worship and the Bible, heaven and hell, church and prayers.

We then attempt to set aside a sacred place for God, designed, we say, to honor God but really intended to keep God in God’s place, leaving us free to have the final say about everything else that goes on.

Prophets do not accept such an approach. They contend that absolutely everything takes place on sacred ground. God has something to say about every aspect of our lives: the way we feel and act in the so-called privacy of our hearts and homes, the way we make our money and the way we spend it, the politics we embrace, the wars we fight, the catastrophes we endure, the people we hurt and the people we help. Nothing is hidden from the scrutiny of God, nothing is exempt from the rule of God, nothing escapes the purposes of God.

Prophets make it impossible to evade God or make detours around God. Prophets insist on receiving God in every nook and cranny of life. For a prophet, God is more real than the next-door neighbor.

Throughout the Book of Isaiah, the prophet Isaiah speaks messages of judgment, comfort, and hope. His ministry spanned about four decades,

beginning sometime around 742 BC and continuing through the rest of the century.

Leading up to today's reading, the first chapters of Isaiah are all about Judah's sin or God's judgment. Isaiah uses harsh words to speak of Judah's wickedness. He speaks of Judeans as rebellious children and describes them as "people loaded with iniquity, a seed of evildoers." He calls them "estranged and backward." He tells of a vine grower (God) who planted a vineyard (Judah) with choice vines, expecting it to yield grapes, but "it yielded wild grapes."

For five chapters, he has pointed his judgmental finger at his fellow Judeans. In chapter six, in the presence of Yahweh's holiness, he suddenly recognizes his own unholiness. It finally occurs to him that he is not only dwelling among a people of unclean lips, but that he is one of them—that his lips are unclean—that he, too, is subject to judgment. It is that "Aha!" moment that humbles him and prepares him for a life of service beyond anything that he otherwise could have accomplished.

Like the stories we've been exploring these past few weeks, in today's readings a person is called and at first says, "not me!" Isaiah cries out, "Woe is me, I am lost." and Simon replies, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, Lord." These are epiphany stories—revealing a moment of sudden insight—in the presence of the Holy they are overwhelmed by their own unholiness. Yet a seraph cleanses Isaiah's lips with a burning coal, and Jesus has a cleansing word for Simon Peter. Both Isaiah and Peter prove faithful to the call.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus begins his ministry, not with the call of the disciples, but as we heard last week, with his sermon at the Nazareth synagogue. He then drives out an unclean spirit (4:31-37), heals Simon's mother-in-law (4:38-41), and preaches in the synagogues of Judea (4:42-44). These actions result in crowds which "pressed on him and heard the word of God" (5:1). They also establish a rationale for the disciples to follow Jesus.

At this point Jesus takes his ministry to the people—to ordinary places where ordinary people spend their days. They are excited to hear the young prophet. The fishermen are cleaning their nets after a long night and as Jesus is standing on the shore, he notices two boats there. He gets into

Simon's boat and asks Simon to "put out a little way from the shore." The boat becomes his pulpit—a solution to the press of the crowd.

When he is done speaking to the crowd, Jesus tests Simon, presenting him with an opportunity to see the kinds of wonders that Jesus is capable of. Simon addresses Jesus as "Master," even as he voices his weariness of having worked all night and catching nothing. Simon Peter's obedience in the face of doubt opens the door to the miracle.

Put out into the deep water, Jesus says to Simon, and let down your nets for a catch. Simon tells him what Jesus already likely knows: Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets. And what comes up sends Simon to his knees: net-breaking, boat-sinking abundance. In the place where Simon and his fellow fishermen had already been laboring, in the landscape they thought they knew, in the place where they had come up empty: a stunning catch, lavish beyond measure.

Fish weren't the only catch of the day; Simon and his companions were hooked. Captivated. Called. And that's what miracles are meant to do: they meet us at our point of need, but they do not leave us there. They call us to move from being recipients to being participants, to share in the ways that God pours out Godself for the life of the community and the healing of the world.

Each of us might think about: How have I been hooked, captivated, called? Jesus says, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." There is an expectation of catching rather than hoping or guessing. What makes it possible for us to see anew in the very same places we've been looking or striving or struggling? And how do we shift from receiving, into participating?

What catches at your heart?

What catches your attention?

What seems important enough to say, here I am - send me!

First, we must see the need - even in places where we think we've already done what we can - we are asked to look with new eyes. Then, we must respond to the need. These steps require a willingness, an openness - to try again (rather than our tendency to say, "Oh, we did that, and it didn't work.") God calls us to put our nets out again!

Essentially, we are called to trust that we will be equipped, and even if we think we know what is on the surface, we do not know what is down deep.

Of course, we often imagine what it is we need or want. We think we know what it will look like when God's grace breaks into our lives.

In today's Gospel, the great catch brings the disciples to the brink of disaster—the blessing is almost too much. This is a miracle of abundance like the manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16), and in 1st and 2nd Kings we hear about the widow's meal and oil (1 Kings 17:8-16) and Elisha's feeding a hundred men with twenty loaves of bread (2 Kings 4:42-44). Later in this Gospel, Jesus will feed five thousand with five loaves and two fish (9:12-17). The Gospel of John reports the miracle of wine at Cana (John 2:1-11).

These abundance miracles have two common characteristics: (1) they meet human needs and (2) they demonstrate God's power. The outcome of this particular miracle is that the disciples "left everything and followed him" (v. 11).

These stories of blessing and bounty got me thinking about the abundance of gifts poured on Tippe and the faith communities working together to feed those who are hungry in Milwaukee. Even when the Divine Intervention ministry couldn't be offered in the winter of 2020, there were ways to help, and those who participated were so generous that it took prayerful deliberation to discern how and where to funnel those resources in ways that would be helpful and sustainable to those in need.

Tippe's nets were bursting! That abundance was shared widely over an extended period, making a difference to both those who were receiving and those who were giving.

Let us continue to tap into these ancient stories that teach us how to live into the kingdom here and now. We then come to recognize what the prophets know - that everything takes place on sacred ground.

Even when we don't comprehend or understand we need to keep looking and listening - opening ourselves to the invitation of discipleship - of showing up and participating - of rooting into our faith and witnessing the abundance that grows out of that. Amen.