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Weekend of Sunday, February 6, 2022

5th Sunday after Epiphany /Year C

First Reading: Isaiah 6:1-8 (9-13)

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Gospel Reading: Luke 5:1-11

Sermon Title: *“The Divine Choice”*

Theme

The fifth Sunday after Epiphany continues to highlight unlikely instruments and circumstances appointed to reveal God’s glory. “Who will go for us?” God asks. A person of unclean lips, a former persecutor of the church of God, and three fishermen who couldn’t catch a thing. More surprising still, perhaps, is that we are also called.

Text

First Reading: Isaiah 6:1-8 [9-13]

¹In 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 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 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!” [⁹And he said, “Go and say to this people:

‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend;
keep looking, but do not understand.’

¹⁰Make the mind of this people dull,

and stop their ears,

and shut their eyes,

so that they may not look with their eyes,

and listen with their ears,

and comprehend with their minds,

and turn and be healed.”

¹¹Then I said, “How long, O Lord?” And he said:

“Until cities lie waste
without inhabitant,

and houses without people,
and the land is utterly desolate;
¹²until the LORD sends everyone far away,
and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.
¹³Even if a tenth part remain in it,
it will be burned again,
like a terebinth or an oak
whose stump remains standing
when it is felled.”
The holy seed is its stump.]

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

¹Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, ²through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

³For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. ¹¹Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

Gospel: Luke 5:1-11

¹Once while Jesus 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.

Sermon

Today we have the tales of three main characters: Isaiah from the Old Testament Book of Isaiah; the apostle Paul from his New Testament letter to the Corinthians; and Simon Peter near the beginning of Jesus' public ministry according to Gospel of Luke.

Like last week's First Reading main character, Jeremiah, this week's First Reading main character is Isaiah. Both were called as youngsters to be the mouthpiece of God. Why did God call these two youngsters? Probably because they were not jaded by the world of politics and religion. They were raw material, untainted with the stuff of life the way we oldsters are.

Isaiah's ministry occurred between 742 and 701 BCE, that critical period during which the northern kingdom of Israel had already fallen to the Assyrians, and the southern kingdom of Judah survived but tenuously as a vassal state of the Assyrians. God allowed this to happen to them to punish them for their faithlessness.

The LORD came to Isaiah in a vision in which the awesomeness of the LORD was revealed. In verses 4 and 5, Isaiah presumed that he will die, because, as you know, no one looks upon the glory of the LORD and lives.

Like Jeremiah last week, in this week's First Reading, Isaiah attempted to decline the LORD's call upon him. Jeremiah reasoned that he was "only a boy" (Jeremiah 1:7). Isaiah reasoned that he was 'a man of unclean lips, who lives among a people of unclean lips.' He did not see himself as one worthy of God's call. I can relate to his reasoning.

Looking back at when I sensed God calling me to the ordained ministry, I thought God was crazy too. I was not particularly biblically literate, or spiritually adept. And I was not the only one who questioned my perception of God's calling me. I don't recall Carol questioning it out loud, but as the stay-at-home mother of two young children, she certainly questioned God's timing. My mother and father questioned it. My mother-in-law told me that she "didn't see it" about me - she was being honest. My father-in-law was the only one who encouraged me to pursue what I sensed God was calling me to. What you see before you today is someone

who has been practicing the vocation for 25 years. This is not who I was 30 years ago. As I concluded last week, God doesn't call the equipped, God equips the called.

Back to the First Reading, please note the brackets around verses 9-13. Those brackets indicate that if I wanted to, I have the discretion to exclude those verses and believe me I was tempted. We all love the story of Isaiah's call. It has been put to music more than a few times. But verses 9-13 are troubling.

The LORD told Isaiah to go to his people, the Israelites, and tell them that because of their faithlessness they will not be able to comprehend what was happening to them. The LORD seemed to be telling Isaiah to deliberately frustrate the people. How long was Isaiah supposed to do that? The LORD said until there is only a remnant of them left, a stump, a seed will be all that will be left!

Now, if you are wondering how a loving god could do that – deliberately frustrate the LORD's own people – let us not forget that the LORD's people had already turned their backs on the LORD. They had broken the covenant the LORD had made with them. The LORD cannot make them, or us for that matter, love, trust, and obey him. So out of the LORD's great love, the LORD let them go their own way in the hope that through their self-imposed suffering they will return to the LORD. The LORD had not abandoned them. The LORD called Isaiah to be his voice among them, to remind them of who's they are, to repent and return to the LORD.

This message hasn't changed for us. Though many of us are pretty self-confident, pretty sure we're right, ready to condemn the government and public health professionals, and anyone who disagrees with us, we could be wrong. There is another tact, another choice we could make. I'll come back to that.

Moving on to the Gospel Reading, we find Jesus at the beginning of his public ministry. He has not yet called any disciples, although by the end of this passage he called Peter, James, and John. Notice that Luke didn't say a word about what Jesus preached on that day, that seems not to be important, just that he had amassed a large crowd of listeners that forced him to put some distance between himself and the crowd so he could be seen and heard. A close read indicates that Jesus got into Peter's boat.

After Jesus was done preaching, he told the fishermen to cast their nets. Now they had been fishing all night and caught nothing, but to humor the teacher, they played along and cast their nets. And as a result, they caught the biggest catch they had ever caught! Initially, James and John saw this as a rare moment of good fortune. But Peter knew that the catch was not simply their good fortune. He knew that Jesus caused it. He knew he was in the presence of someone extraordinary. Peter had an epiphany. Luke wrote, ⁹"He fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Once again we have a revelation of the Divine, and the person who experienced it concluded that he was unworthy. At that moment, Peter did not understand what was going on, but in just a few more moments, when he was called to be one of Jesus' disciples, he dropped what he was doing and followed him.

Included in the Second Reading, the apostle Paul gave a brief version of his testimony. Writing about the witnesses of the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, the apostle wrote,

⁸Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹For I am the least of the apostles, *unfit to be called an apostle*, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

Paul, who was previously known as Saul, was one of those guys who was pretty self-confident, pretty sure he was right and was willing to kill for it. However, as it turned out, he was wrong. In this passage, he too considered himself "unfit" to be called by God in Christ, but when confronted by the risen Lord Jesus Christ, he repented, and committed to learning everything he could about this one who could not be kept by death and the grave, and who had mercy on him, and gave him a chance for redemption.

In each of the three readings, we have a character who struggled to make a choice. In the First Reading, Isaiah was called upon to deliver a difficult message to his people, the Israelites. In the Gospel Reading, Peter was asked to leave his world behind and follow Jesus. And in the Second Reading, the apostle Paul was confronted by the error of his ways and was called to use his energy and conviction to spread the Good News. I would like to suggest that each of these three men had

a choice to make, and the choice each one of them made was what I would like to call "the Divine Choice."

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Now let me bring this home to each one of us.

Each one of us has to make several choices every day. Some of them aren't very important. No one cares whether we wear black or gray slacks today. No one cares what route we take to work today. But there are other choices that you and I have to make every day that matter more, that have become so political and volatile that we should make them with a great deal of thought – though some don't.

Mask or not. Vaccine or not. Travel or not. Isolate or not. Trust and obey civil leaders and health professionals or not, to name just a few.

We can pontificate, demand answers, and place blame, but I would argue, that only frustrates ourselves and those around us, and likely our need for answers and blame will go unsatisfied.

I argue, based on the texts today, that a better choice, *the Divine Choice*, would be to wrap ourselves into the mystery that is God and try to come to a better understanding and knowledge of God and what God is doing, so that we can join God there.

It has been my experience that God is:

- more interested in people than problems;
- more interested in our responses than the issues;
- more interested in our processes than the outcomes.

This paradigm shift will frustrate those who need answers and need to be right. But abiding in God will cause us to:

- be more concerned for people over fixing their problems;
- respond in love and compassion instead of arguing over an issue, and;
- be Christ-like in our process of helping rather than pass judgment.

Would it surprise you if I told you there was a name for what I am suggesting? Throughout the Old Testament, there is this Hebrew concept of *shalom*. We minimize it when we define shalom as peace. Peace is the absence of conflict. Shalom means more than peace; it also includes harmony, wholeness, completeness, prosperity, welfare, and tranquility. That sounds pretty nice, doesn't it? When we abide in the LORD, we will have shalom, because shalom is a byproduct of abiding in the LORD.

And when we make the Divine Choice to abide in the LORD and have shalom, the need in us ceases to be that we are right and victorious and we are transformed into someone who truly desires to be Christ-like; to be loving, graceful, and merciful.

Prayer

Loving God, give us your Spirit so that we desire to abide in you, where we find our true purpose, and in fulfilling it, we find shalom. We pray this in Jesus' name.
Amen