

“Out of the Shallow, Into the Deep”

Isaiah 6: 1-8, Luke 5: 1-11

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany/C, February 4, 2007

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One morning, a minister drove past a church and noticed something peculiar on the sign out front. Now many churches around here do not post their sermon titles on a sign in front of the church. However, on that particular day in this particular town this church’s sign had only one word on it. Can you guess what that word might have been? Maybe they had forgotten to finish the sentence or ran out of letters and had to decide what one word from the full title would suffice. For whatever the reason, the sign said “Call.” That was it! Call! Is it a noun? Is it a verb? No one could tell.

The significance of the word “call” may differ depending upon the church in which you were raised. If you were raised in the Catholic Church, call might mean the priest’s call. If you were raised in the Baptist tradition, you might understand call more broadly. Everyone might be called to a particular ministry, lay or ordained. However, if you were raised in a more evangelical tradition discerning your “call” may set up an unintended pecking order. If you have received a “call” you are in, if you are still waiting for a “call” is that a sign of a weaker faith?

A call from God has been central to the scripture lessons these past few weeks. We have heard of Jeremiah’s call and his reluctance to say yes for all the reasons we are likely to articulate. Today we hear Isaiah’s call and his feeling of unworthiness that keeps him from saying yes. I am an unclean man, he says, living among unclean men. He does not feel equipped or adequate to answer God’s call. In each case, God does not accept our feeble excuses. God is persistent with them and with us. We can not whine our way out or argue our way out or play the unworthy card to get out of answering God’s call.

Today’s gospel lesson helps us to think differently about what a call from God is like. I appreciate the way Simon Peter responds in this story. You can always count on him to say something you might say if you were in his shoes. The gospel story does not look like some of the call stories we have heard. There is no burning bush like the story of Moses, no blinding light on the road to Demascus like for Paul, no booming voice in the Temple filled with incense like Isaiah. In this story, the call comes not as a summons, but

an invitation. It comes to an ordinary enough man, in the midst of his own struggle to make a living for himself and his family.

It is morning and Jesus asks to simply sit for a while in Simon Peter's boat after a long night of fishing. He knows Simon is frustrated and exhausted having caught nothing all night long. It is now morning, time to put the boat to bed and hope for a better outcome when he sets sail again. As the song says, "Momma said there'd be days like this." We all have them, days that leave you frustrated and exhausted and bewildered or even sad. Those days that leave you wondering why you keep trying harder and harder and seem to get the same frustrating results. Perhaps this was simply an unusually bad day of fishing for Simon Peter. Perhaps this was the last of a long string of such days. We really don't know. We only know that Jesus thinks he has the answer to Simon's dilemma and he is not afraid to tell him.

Before Peter puts away his nets and calls it a day, Jesus invites him to try one more time. "Go out into the deep water," Jesus says, "and there let down your nets." It sounds pretty simple, doesn't it? But is it really? What Jesus is really asking is for Simon Peter and the other fishermen to trust him. He wants Peter to trust Jesus enough to leave the shallow places in his life and begin to explore deeper waters. Jesus is saying, "even though I am not a fisherman, even though I do not make my living on a boat, I want you to trust that what I am telling you is true. What you seek can not be found here in the shallow waters, you must set out into deeper waters."

In order to set out into the deep waters we will have to leave our comfort zone, those places that feel safe and familiar. If trouble arises, and it most likely will, we are farther from home, farther from safety, perhaps more vulnerable. However, the amazing catch the fishermen received when they trust Jesus reminds us that there are riches to be discovered only when we are willing to go deeper.

Perhaps that is why many of us hesitate to accept such an invitation. Perhaps we know, as Simon Peter did, that once we take the risk to leave what is familiar and comfortable, the direction of our life may very well change. Through this encounter with Jesus, Simon Peter learned that when he left the shallow waters, shallow places in his relationships with other people, shallow places he is not willing to face within himself and with God—and dared to go deeper, his life was completely changed.

Jesus can only invite us into the deeper waters. It is always up to us to take that first step. This is the time of year when the both the confirmation students and their sponsors receive a similar invitation to venture into the deeper waters of their faith. On Sunday evenings in January, while many of us are home watching the football playoff games, confirmation sponsors gather in the fellowship room to participate in Nights with Nicodemus. They share stories and receive guidance and wisdom that shape and strengthen their faith. I have not been part of this experience, however, I understand it is empowering for everyone who has. I imagine that more than a few people respond to Dick's invitation to participate in this class much like Simon Peter did saying rather skeptically, "okay, Dick, if you say so," wondering what kind of difference it might really make.

The confirmation students are beginning a similar process. In the coming weeks each student will present a life map. Their maps should do more than simply illustrate things they have done. They should instead, reflect where God has been present to them or their friends or their family in and through these events. Their peers are coached to ask questions that will help their friends go deeper, to move them beyond the shallow waters into the deep. This is a pivotal moment in their confirmation experience. As they hold each other accountable, they find companions for that journey out of the familiar into the unknown.

So often we respond just like Simon Peter did saying, "okay, Master, if you say so..." We are hesitant and skeptical. We don't really believe, we don't yet trust, but perhaps we are willing to take that first step. That initial step however, can be the hardest to take. We come up with all kinds of excuses to stay right where we are; no one will listen to me, no one will care if we try it that way. We tried that before and it didn't make a difference. We tried that before and it failed miserably. These are all good ways to avoid pushing out into deeper water. After trying and failing and trying some more we begin to believe that there is nothing out there in the depths for us. Jesus wants us to trust that maybe just maybe this time it will be different.

These excuses are just another way of saying I am not good enough to do this. I am not smart enough. I am not young enough. I am not old enough. I am not faithful enough. Like Isaiah we believe perhaps we are an unclean person living among unclean people. Perhaps it is best if you just leave me alone, Jesus. Move on to someone else who has what it takes. Find someone else who is young enough and strong enough and witty enough and pretty

enough to be your servant. It is best if you leave me alone, if you give up on me like I have given up on myself. I have done what you have asked and it just isn't working.

As soon as Peter stops listening to that old story and submits to Jesus' new story is when everything changes. This is when he becomes the model disciple for all of us. Peter was sure he could not do what Jesus was asking, but if Jesus says so...perhaps he would try. Trying is all Jesus asks of us. Jesus doesn't expect us to have all the answers, to save the world on our own, to break down every barrier, to change every heart. Jesus hopes and prays that we will simply trust him enough to make one voyage into deeper waters. Just this once to see what might come of it. Like Simon Peter, saying yes might change your life. Like Peter, when you set out into deeper waters, even reluctantly, what you might find is abundance like you could never have imagined.

Rev. Richard Ward says "it is not the kind of abundance that makes Peter rich. It's the kind of abundance that shows Peter how rich God's grace and love are. And how much God wants to be in relationship with all of us." Through his encounter with Jesus Peter becomes a new man. Those things that made him a good fisherman will now make him a faithful disciple. He needs only to believe and trust in the power of God. Not an easy thing to do. As we seek the courage to set out into deeper, uncharted waters, may we pray as Sir France Drake did so many centuries ago:

Disturb us, Lord when  
We are too pleased with ourselves  
When our dreams have come true  
Because we dreamed too little  
When we arrived safely  
Because we sailed too close to shore.

I know it is morning, and you haven't caught a thing. However, set out into the deep waters and set your nets down there. You never know what might happen. May it be so!

Amen.