

Epiphany 5, Year C (RCL)
February 6, 2022
New Song Church
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Isaiah 6:1-8
Psalm 138
1 Corinthians 15:1-11
Luke 5:1-11

Here Am I, Send Me

Just imagine . . . You are an average person living an average life. You have an average family who experience the average ups and downs of any family. Today is like any other day. You are going about your daily routine as you normally do when suddenly – and totally unexpectedly, you find yourself face to face with God. Average changes in an instant to extraordinary. Routine flies out the window as you struggle to regain your balance. The expectable becomes the inexplicable, and all that you had once been so sure of is now covered with question marks.

Everything familiar pales in the presence of the unknown and the surprising. Your mind races, filled with questions your mouth refuses to form into audible, coherent sentences. Something in the pit of your stomach tells you that nothing will ever be “average” again – that the extraordinary has, in this instant, become your way of life, and you realize that every event in your life will now be defined as either being before or after this singular event. It’s not something you asked for or even wanted, but for whatever reason you have been singled out as the object of God’s attention at this moment in time.

Today’s texts offer not one, but two stories of God’s surprising grace – of God’s call on the lives of unsuspecting by-standers along life’s way – of ordinary people suddenly confronted with the stark reality of God’s presence. Stories of lives transformed – turned upside down so that God’s Word might live, not only in their hearts, but also in the hearts of those they too will touch in their new-found (or

should I say newly-appointed) ministries.

Isaiah's encounter with God comes in the form of a vision of God sitting on a throne attended by six winged "angel-like" creatures called seraphs who flew around God saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of God's glory!" Isaiah is terrified, and understandably so. He assumes his death is imminent because he, a mere mortal, has seen God.

Like Moses before the burning bush, Isaiah realizes that he stands on Holy Ground. As Isaiah sees this vision of the glory of God, he also comes to see himself more clearly, and not in a good way. As he looks in the mirror of the glory of God, his own reflection reveals a sorry sight – a vision of one whose life is stained by sin. The contrast between God's holiness and his own sin is too great for Isaiah to bear, and in his fear, he cries out, "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!" Isaiah has to be thinking, "Who am I to be honored by the presence of the most high God? I am a nothing, a nobody. I'm not worthy – besides, what if I fail at whatever God might be asking me to do?"

And Isaiah is right – he is not worthy, just as none of us by our own goodness or merit is worthy – but God makes Isaiah worthy. Of all the people God could have chosen at that moment in history, God chooses Isaiah – singles Isaiah out for a particular purpose and for this incredible glimpse of God. In answer to Isaiah's objections about his lack of worthiness, one of the seraphs flies to the altar, takes a live coal with a pair of tongs and flies to Isaiah, touching the white-hot coal to Isaiah's lips. As he does so the seraph pronounces absolution on Isaiah, "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Instead of death, Isaiah receives a life changing gift of God's grace and he is forgiven.

Objections silenced – Isaiah’s sin is no more. Then Isaiah hears the voice of the Lord consulting the heavenly council, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Transformed by his encounter and eager to offer something back to God, Isaiah is like a kid jumping up and down with his hand in the air. “Pick me! Pick me!” “Here am I, send me.”

Totally different in its setting, but very similar in its message is the story of the call of Simon Peter to be one of Jesus’ disciples – a fish story of major proportions you might say. It is not only improbable, but by human standards, impossible. Peter and his companions are skilled fishermen. They are keenly aware of the weather, the time of day, just how to cast their nets without scaring away the fish, and all the circumstances which make for the best fishing conditions. Night is the ideal time for fishing and daybreak signals the time to call it a night – to pull in their nets, wash and repair them, sell whatever fish they have caught, get something to eat, and then get some rest so that they will be ready for the fall of darkness and the challenge of a new night’s work.

On this particular occasion, it is morning and they have fished all night. Time and again they cast their nets, hoping for a good return for their efforts. Time and again they come up empty with absolutely nothing to show for their hard work. It is time to clean their nets and head for home. They are tired and frustrated and want nothing more than to crawl into bed. But as they clean their nets on the shore, they notice that a crowd has gathered. One of the crowd is motioning to Simon. After speaking briefly, the man climbs into Simon’s boat and they push away from the shore. Now free from the pressing crowds, Jesus begins to teach the crowds from the boat. All of this seems strange, but the real surprise is yet to come. Jesus says to Simon “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”

Wait. What? Who is this teacher to try to tell skilled fisherman how to fish?!

Simon patiently and politely objects that they have already tried that, all night long,

but have caught nothing. But despite his skepticism about the probability of catching any fish, Simon decides to do as Jesus says. In no time at all so many fish are swarming into their nets that they are at the point of breaking. They quickly signal their friends in the other boat to come and help them. Both boats fill up and begin to sink with the weight of their catch. Up to his armpits in flopping fish, Simon suddenly sees Jesus for who he really is and falls to his knees, aware that he has just witnessed a miracle of God. His weariness replaced by excitement, awe, and fear, like Isaiah, Simon pleads, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” Not exactly the response that one would expect from a fisherman with a boat full of fish.

But Jesus’ reply is gentle, “It’s OK Simon, don’t be afraid; from now on you will be catching people. Up until now you have caught fish to sell at the market, but now you will catch people, pulling them out of the waters of sin and destruction – bringing them from death to life.”

Quite a transformation – from fisherman to apostle. But Simon embraces God’s call. When they are finally able to bring the boats to the shore, Simon along with his fishing buddies James and John leave their miraculous catch without looking back, and they follow Jesus.

This story makes me wonder where God is calling us to cast our nets as a congregation. After all, we and other mainline denominations have been casting our nets in various ways – but we often seem to come up empty. As we attempt to follow God’s call, it is easy to become discouraged. It seems as though there are so many things that can limit our effectiveness – an increasingly secular society, political polarization, other activities vying for our time and attention – oh, and then there is the small matter of a raging pandemic. No wonder we sometimes feel tempted to just give up this time and go home. Perhaps, later on, we will try again.

But God has other ideas for us and urges us to set aside our excuses and our own feelings of inadequacy and to stay and keep trying, only perhaps in a different way – God’s way – this time. And so we stay, trusting that God will guide us and will be with us in the work that we do. God is inviting each of us, sins, shortcomings, excuses and all, to follow where the Spirit leads and to discover new hope, new excitement for ministry, and new life in the process. All we need to do is to be open to accepting God’s call and as a congregation say, “Here I am God, send me.”

We’re already seeing that kind of openness to God’s call. Following our annual meeting last week, 30 people have signed up to read Stephanie Speller’s book *The Church Cracked Open*. Of those, 28 people will be in one of the book discussion groups that will begin soon, including 100% of New Song’s vestry members! I find that response incredibly exciting and I hope you do as well. It seems to me that through Speller’s book, God is suggesting that the church cast our nets on the other side – a side we haven’t experienced before – that we haven’t ever considered. We don’t yet know exactly where God will ask us to cast our nets, or what we will find once we do. What we do know is that the Spirit is active and is moving in our midst, so hang on, this could get interesting!