

“Casting Call”

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Isaiah 6:1-8

Luke 5:1-11

Before I dive into these scriptures, I invite you to feel them with your senses. First, let's visit the temple in Isaiah. God is on a throne, and is so huge that the hem of God's robe fills the temple. I wonder what color it is. And God's face? Well, you can't even see it, because seraphs— that is, angels— are blocking our view of God: God's head, God's feet, swarming around God. Even the seraphs are hiding their faces from God, whose image is too holy to see face to face. Smoke fills the room. The seraphs announce how glorious this moment, this presence is, as they sing or shout, “*Kadosh! Kadosh! Kadosh!*” which in Hebrew means “Holy, holy! holy! Holy is the Lord of hosts! Heaven and earth are full of God's glory!” Holy— it means set apart for sacred purpose. This is not the ordinary, hum-drum, but a transcendent moment that the prophet, or you or I, cannot slip away without marking its significance.

In the Roman Catholic eucharist, they do a pretty good job of embodying this moment. In many churches, incense fills the sanctuary. When the priest prays for the Holy Spirit's presence over the bread and wine, bells ring, letting worshippers know that this moment is set apart as extraordinary, glorious, holy. It's especially noticeable when I attend a funeral mass with church members from our Presbyterian church. That moment when the bell rings, everyone who is not Catholic perks up a little in amazement.

Isaiah, the prophet, was certainly amazed. Humbled in the presence of such glory, he begins his speech of separating himself from the holiness around him: Woe is me! I am lost. A man of unclean lips. And I live among a people of unclean lips. And yet, I am seeing glory!

It is as if the angels are shouting, “Holy! Holy! Holy!” and Isaiah is responding, “Not worthy! Not worthy! Not worthy!”

Cut from this scene, to another scene. Imagine you are in it. You are one of those fishers, gripping the net, scrubbing it clean. Although you are docked now, your body still feels the gentle rocking of the waves. The fishy smell lingering on the nets is from other days, luckier days, when the nets came in teeming with fish, flip-flopping as they tried to find their freedom; their lost freedom translated into freedom for the fishers: fish becomes food, and food becomes money, and money becomes options, freedom. Today, your nets came back empty. The boat dips a bit into the water, and you realize Jesus has just stepped on. He asks you to push out, into the water again— even though the prime fishing hours have passed. There, just off the shore, he starts teaching, his voice echoing across the water to the listeners gathered on shore. He speaks of things: life, death, food, money, God. Somehow, he makes the simple, earthly things take on holy significance. Then, Jesus turns to you. He asks you to set the nets out

again, into the water. Simon Peter interrupts— hey, Jesus, we've been fishing these waters all night long, with nothing to show for it. But if you think we should give it another try, fine. Sure. We can fish for another hour.

Right away, you feel a tug on the nets. In fact it is so heavy you have to push your foot against the wall of the boat so that its weight doesn't pull you in. But just as quickly, the weight lightens, because 6 sets of hands are surrounding you. And minutes later, six more sets of hands help with the labor of pulling in the full nets, because the second boat's crew has joined *your* boat. There are so many fish, the nets are breaking, but together you manage to pull the bounty on to the boat. There is barely room to stand, between the people, and the fish. But still. Simon Peter falls to his knees at Jesus' feet, overcome. "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!" he cries out. "Don't be afraid," Jesus tells him and the others. "From now on you will be catching people."

Several things occur to me from these two stories. The first is how much God needs, how much Jesus needs, flawed, sinful people to accomplish holy things. Both Isaiah, and Simon Peter, try to create a distinction between their uncleanness, their sinfulness, their being lost— compared to the holy glory, goodness, and perfection of God and of Jesus. But in each of these stories, we are shown that these distinctions don't matter— or maybe they do matter, but in a needed way. As for Isaiah, a seraph took a hot coal and touched it to the man's lips, declaring him clean and holy: his sin has disappeared and his guilt has been blotted out. He is ready to do God's work. He is ready to prophecy, to be God's messenger.

But as for the disciples, Jesus does not make them pure of sins. He does not feed them the right words. As we will see throughout the gospels, the disciples will still make mistakes. Lots of them. And I think that is a necessary characteristic for the job of disciple. Maybe just such an entourage— a group of people that don't act "holier than thou"— helped to make Jesus more relatable to others. Maybe they helped Jesus understand the people he came to save. Maybe they helped Jesus stay in touch with his humanity, his earthly limits, so that he could better accomplish his task of bringing forth Emmanuel— God-with-Us. Maybe they showed him how to love, and to grieve, and to say I'm sorry, and to laugh at a joke, and to long for something, or someone, not within your grasp. Maybe they taught Jesus what it is like when humans grapple with a God who is not to be found.

Maybe Jesus could simply not do it all on his own. None of us can. Holy grace helps us accept that fact, that we are not our own gods, that we have limits, that we need to rely on others. Holy grace helps us to receive the hands that can join in grabbing for the net, pulling in what feels too heavy, and finding that burden grows lighter when it is shared, and when it is shared there can even be a feast to be discovered.

Think of all those fish they brought to shore that day. Remember: fish was food, and food was money, and money was options, freedom. And yet, Jesus told them to leave it all behind to follow him. I wonder who ate from that bounty that day. Who was hungry and did not know when or where their next meal would come? Who had nowhere to stay, but could sell fish in the

market and find a bed for a few nights? Who was lonely, but could now invite guests to their home to share in a meal?

I never grew up learning how to fish— not for sport, or for food. We don't really live in a society that depends on fishing for survival; although sometimes I do see people fishing off the pier in Edgewater, I'm not too sure about eating fish from that portion of the Hudson. Even so, people all around us, even in our church are fishing, fishing because they need more sustenance physically. Fishing because they need more sustenance spiritually. Sometimes, you fish, and fish, and fish, but your nets come up empty.

As a church, we can join hands in grasping the nets and discover the faith that helps us pull in nets teeming with life. I am so glad that our church is participating today in preparing and serving a meal for Family Promise and its 150 shelter guests. So many people pitched in something, and a lot of the offerings were small from small people: I understand several children and teens did things like wrapped utensil sets, baked brownies, and helped marinate the chicken, bring in bottled waters. People shopped. People who couldn't be there in person donated money. All morning people have been chopping and cooking in the kitchen. Some organized and tracked down volunteers. Later some will deliver and serve the meals.

We all have ordinary things to offer. For some of us, we can only see how flawed they are. How limited our energy. How insignificant our gifts measure in comparison to God's glory or the world's deep need.

But when offered in the context of others offering their flawed gifts, it becomes something else. We are like the bread and the wine: ordinary, simple, earthly elements that become something holy and significant when brought together in the blessing of the church. Thanks be to God! Amen.