

Luke 5:1-11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He 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.

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So 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.

But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and 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." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Isaiah 6:1-8

In 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. Seraphs 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. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

And 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!" Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The 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."

Then 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!"

We heard quite a fish story from the Gospel this morning. Jesus preaches from an empty fishing boat. It's empty because the fishermen fished all night and did not catch a thing. When they drop their nets, though, where this wandering rabbi tells them,

they catch so many fish that their nets threaten to break and they call in their friends in another boat to bring in all the fish.

When he sees this, Simon Peter, as he is so often, is the first to speak. This time, though, he has not leapt to a conclusion.

Simon had not lent his boat to a total stranger. In the end of the previous chapter of Luke's Gospel, Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law from a terrible fever,<sup>1</sup> and healed many people who had been possessed by demons. Simon realizes who this is who is standing in front of him. He realizes that this is God standing in his boat. He tells Jesus, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

Peter is not saying that he himself is some kind of reprobate, more sinful than other people. He is saying that the holy and the ordinary do not go together, and he fears the power of God. Being in the presence of God, you see, is a dangerous thing. Holiness has this habit of leaking out.

A con man named Jacob did not live up to God's or his father's expectations, until he met God face to face in a night-time wrestling match. Jacob limped away from that wrestling match a changed man. He dealt honorably and well with his brother Esau, whom he had previously defrauded, and he became the patriarch of the whole Tribe of Israel.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 4:38-40.

<sup>2</sup> You can read all about it in Genesis 38 and surrounding chapters.

A fugitive murderer named Moses came into the presence of God in a burning bush in the desert, and he was forever changed. He became the strong, fearless leader who confronted Pharaoh and led the people of Israel out of Egypt.<sup>3</sup>

The Ark of the Covenant was God's seat, and a mark of God's holy presence. When King David had the Ark moved to his newly-conquered capital city of Jerusalem, the oxen stumbled, and the ark shook. One of David's men reached out his hand and touched the ark to steady it, and he was struck dead on the spot.<sup>4</sup> I'm not making this up: you can read about it in Second Samuel and First Chronicles.

Isaiah, too, was afraid to stand before God in our Old Testament reading this morning. In an instant, he went from being an ordinary man to being God's prophet. His plans for his life, whatever they were, were left behind as he embarked on a lifetime of speaking truth to power, telling four successive kings of Judah to straighten up and rule right.

These are just four of the stories that Simon would have heard when he was growing up about people coming face to face with God. If you stand in the presence of God, the best case result is a life that is changed forever.

So, when Simon hears Jesus preaching and witnesses his power to do miracles, it is entirely reasonable that his first, knee-jerk reaction is not, "What wisdom, power, and authority you have! Let me follow you. Send me out to do whatever you want done."

No, Simon's first reaction is sheer, abject terror. He is not fit to stand before God Almighty, and he knows it. He confesses his sin.

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<sup>3</sup> Exodus 3 and following.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Samuel 6:1-8; 1 Chronicles 13:9-13

Did you notice, though? We usually think of confession and God's grace as happening in that order. We confess that we are painfully mired in the human condition of sin, and God gives us grace to address that.

Here, Jesus has already given Peter grace. Jesus has given him a huge gift, and then Peter confesses his sin.

I believe that happens to us all.

God gives us grace, and then we can see where we are. Without God's grace, we cannot even see that we have a problem. God gives us grace, and our eyes are opened. We can see that we stand in God's presence. We can see that we are unworthy.

We confess our sins, and then we can see and receive even greater grace. We are assured of God's love for us, and we are given work to do.

Jesus tells Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people."

First, Jesus says, "Do not be afraid."

You have heard me say before that "Do not be afraid" is the most commonly given command in the Bible, and the least often obeyed. It is true. God does not want us to be afraid of anything or anyone out there. If God is with us, who can be against?<sup>5</sup>

So, I tell you now. We cannot hide anything from God. God knows that you are unworthy in your own right to stand in God's presence. God knows that I am unworthy in

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<sup>5</sup> Romans 8:21

my own right to stand in God's presence, much less stand up here as a leader. God knows that we are less than what God intends us to be. That is true of each of us as individuals, and of all of us as a group. Humanity is better than it has been at times in history, but we are still far from being what God wants us to be.

The first thing we need to hear about that is, "Do not be afraid." Fear tells us that, if we stand up and do something, we will be alone. Fear tells us that there is nothing we can do, so why do anything. Fear lies.

Fear keeps us trapped in sin, in places and situations where we do not belong. Fear keeps us from standing up and saying, "That is wrong." Fear keeps us from standing up and being the people whom Jesus calls us to be.

Of course, it is not as simple as saying, "Don't be scared." If it were as simple as that, then no one would be afraid. Fear is a powerful trap, and it is easy to fall back into that trap when we are off balance in our lives. We get off balance in our lives when we are hungry, when we are angry, when we are lonely, when we are tired.<sup>6</sup> We get off balance when we have suffered a loss. I'm sure that you can think of other times and conditions in your life when you have been off balance, and it was easy to become afraid.

We need to keep coming back to God. This is one reason we have worship services every week – it's not because God needs it, it's because we need it. We need to confess our sins, and we need to hear again that God knows, and God loves us anyway.

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<sup>6</sup> The HALT acronym comes from Alcoholics Anonymous, who have spent many years studying what causes people to fall back into the trap of addiction.

Another reason we need to have worship services every week is that we need to be reminded that we do not exist for ourselves alone. The world out there will tell you that “greed is good,”<sup>7</sup> and “selfishness is a virtue.”<sup>8</sup> The world is wrong.

Jesus tells Peter not to be afraid, but he goes on. He says to this fisherman, “from now on you will be catching people.” Simon Peter is unworthy in his own right to stand in God’s presence, but, acting in Jesus’ name, he does amazing things.

Jesus may not be calling you to speak his words to thousands of people,<sup>9</sup> but Jesus is calling you to act in his name by speaking his words of truth and grace and love. You can do that in the neighborhood, or at work, or in the grocery store, or in your own family.

Jesus may not be calling you to heal cripples with a touch,<sup>10</sup> but Jesus is calling you to act in his name by healing division and pain. You have the power to heal by gentle words, by defending the weak, and by offering to others the grace that you have been given.

Graciousness and Peace and Love may not be the gifts that you think God has given you. They are certainly not fishing. Or logistics. Or computers. Or however you make your living.

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<sup>7</sup> Gordon Gekko, in the 1987 movie *Wall Street*. Gekko was intended by the writer and director to be a terrifying villain, but he has been adopted by a generation of wall street traders as an idol.

<sup>8</sup> Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* [sic] (1964).

<sup>9</sup> Acts 2.

<sup>10</sup> Acts 3: 1-10.

But they are gifts that we know Jesus has, and they are gifts that our world needs right now. If we will let Jesus work through us, He will change the world, and we will get to be part of it.

I tell you, today, we stand in the presence of God, just as certainly as Peter did in his boat that day thousands of years ago, in a Galilee far, far away. I don't believe that God plans to strike any of us dead, but God will change us. God gives us grace, and God expects us to offer it to the people around us.

Every week, when I read the Scriptures, I stand up here and I call you the people of God. This week, let us work to be the people of God in God's world.

AMEN