

### **Isaiah 6:1-13**

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!" And he said, "Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.' Make 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."

Then 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; until the LORD sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land. Even 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.

### **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 are partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people."

I've heard tell of a woman whose life had come undone, and in ways that she had some hand in. It landed her in a deep well of grief and shame, which only isolated her all the more. She had an acquaintance who told her she should try going to church—maybe to help her cope with

the grief? Maybe there she'd strike on a solution or some relief. "Why would I go to church?" the woman asked her acquaintance. "I feel bad enough about myself already."

There are a lot of ways "church" has made people feel bad about themselves. With too much emphasis on "sin," or by just getting the concept wrong; with a simplistic understanding of people, that they're either good or bad, worthy of praise or worthy of blame; with a way of engaging our sacred texts that only pretends at serious, as if we secretly believe they couldn't hold together under actual scrutiny, as if careful study isn't also a form of devotion; with overt or tacit demands that those "in church" conform to one another or at least make nice, that they obey those in authority and submit to an ideology that relies on cognitive dissonance: there are a lot of ways church has made people feel bad about themselves over the years, perhaps even the centuries.

This is hardly an exhaustive list.

Like, it doesn't include the only scriptural reason, the only *legitimate* reason, why people might end up feeling lousy about themselves in church.

"Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Simon Peter said, though we have no reason to suspect he was really all that bad. We don't know much about him at this point in Luke's gospel, only that he lived in the same town where Jesus had been brought up, that his mother-in-law had been sick, and that Jesus cured her, though those last two weren't really even about Peter. Actually, the way Simon Peter is brought into this story it seems he was someone who needed no introduction, was instead a known entity, having been present in the life of Jesus as a given for a long time, maybe forever. I guess we also know he had a fishing boat and had spent the night before this incident fishing, though catching nothing. And that's it. Nothing bad. Nothing out of the ordinary.

"Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" That's a little extreme, especially for someone Jesus maybe considered an old friend.

As for Jesus, he'd been gathering crowds in his teaching as one with authority, and in his healing a man with an unclean spirit and Simon Peter's mother-in-law who'd had a fever. And now the crowd was pressing on him, was pushing him even to the edge of the lake. So he got into one of the two boats that was bumping against the shore, got into Simon Peter's boat and set off, just far enough off the beach to be unencumbered but close enough still that the water could carry his voice to those on the shore who longed to hear it, longed to hear him speak.

We don't know what he said, as we often don't. You'd think the gospel writers would have made a go at getting this sort of thing down. If the crowds so clearly wanted to hear what he had to say, wouldn't it be a safe assumption that the hearers of the text would also want to hear what he had to say, as would the eventual readers of this text?

And so we would hear it, read it in some cases. Later on in this gospel, we'll hear the words of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain, just as in Matthew's gospel we hear the words of his Sermon on the Mount. Of course, we often hear his parables and sometimes even interpretation of his parables. But just as often, it seems, we only hear of the quality of his speech, not the content. We're often told he spoke as "one with authority," as if that's enough.

And I suppose it is. For me anyway, when I stop and think about it, it's enough for me to know the quality of his speaking as much as the content. Like, as I remember the teachers from whom I learned the most, I remember their manner of speech as much as what they said, their way about their imparting of knowledge as much as what knowledge they had to impart. More, actually. I remember the feeling of trust and curiosity such *trustworthy* authority stirred in me.

You know, maybe this is why the gospel writers often left off what Jesus had to say, focused instead on him as a vessel for saying it, that this is the more important quality about Jesus, and that this is more important for us as we aim to follow Jesus—not that we get the words exactly right but that we be filled with the same authoritative spirit, of wisdom, of truth, as he so obviously was.

I mean, those crowds...

Those crowds: they wouldn't be just for Jesus to attract and to inspire. Not anymore. Now they would be for the disciples to do as well. Fishers of men; fishers of people: this is what they, like Jesus, were to become. This is what *we* are to become.

It's not a perfect metaphor. It implies that we've been "caught" for starters; it implies that those who've chosen to follow Jesus are as fish out of water, flopping around on a dock. They're not, *we're* not, and I don't think Jesus meant to imply this about us. Neither did he mean to imply we'd be sold at market or eaten at dinner. If anything, it's the way the metaphor falls apart that suggests the most. The mundane work that Simon Peter had been doing, good as it is, important—essential—as it is, would be as training ground for something even more transformative.

It all amounted to more than Simon Peter could handle, at least as it struck him that morning. Now with a boat full to near sinking of fish that had eluded him earlier; now having

newly seen someone whom he had always known (ordinary Jesus, good old Jesus), newly seeing him in an epiphany that is perfect for us this season of Epiphany: it was all too much. His friend from when they were kids together, suddenly healing the sick and withstanding the devil and being proclaimed as God's beloved Son and catching the catch of a lifetime only to leave it there on the shore: "Get away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"—though he really doesn't seem to have been all that "sinful." Just a guy. Just a regular guy.

Isaiah's response was about the same. Though nearly eight hundred years earlier, and amidst some very different circumstances, Isaiah's response to the presence of the holy was about the same as Simon Peter's. This was the year King Uzziah died, so the year 742 before the Common Era, as Uzziah's 52-year reign would come to an end.

It would be followed by two hundred more years before the cataclysmic fall of Judah that this prophetic book, Isaiah, would give witness to. Three "Isaias" go into this book, three people prophesying under the name Isaiah. The first speaks from prior to the fall of Judah, and then Israel, and then Jerusalem. The second speaks from amidst the exile, when the people Israel and Judah were living in Babylon. "Third Isaiah" speaks during the return to the land.

This first Isaiah, then, would begin the long period of warning that things wouldn't always be like this, that things would start to get contentious and the whole region would rearrange itself, and sometimes violently so and at terrific expense of human life. Really, this "first Isaiah" would have as central to his task sounding a warning that no one would listen to. That seems largely the point.

As for this call of God to Isaiah, Bible scholars understand the exclamation point punctuating Isaiah's response—"Here am I; send me!"—as added after the fact, and for effect. The original text, like the original response, probably wasn't so exclamatory, probably was but resigned. The only one in the room, this "First Isaiah;" the one to whom the Lord was clearly speaking because he was the only one there, perhaps hiding under a bed or behind some curtains; sought and now found: "Here I am. Send me."

Prior to that, though, was the initial arrest: "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 what is holy, holy, holy..."

The juxtaposition was just too much. The juxtaposition between being a potty-mouth and being sought out by the holy, holy, holy: it was too much. It just feels wrong, out of place. Have you ever been a single seminarian, met someone in a bar, told that person you're a seminarian, and watched as that person charted a course away from you as quickly as possible? I have. People wonder about how Jesse and I met, how we ended up married. I explain, other than him being a wonderful person, a lovely man, he's also the only one who ever called me once he figured out what my life would be about.

But I can relate to this more from the other angle, because the fact is I'm a person of unclean lips too, someone who's way too comfortable with the word that once was considered the worst word (it starts with an F). I let that one fly often, too often—like almost last week and from this very pulpit. When we remembered in prayer that car accident, in which a man named Francis died and a woman named Michelle was at fault for being drunk while driving, and when it became clear that, as close as this accident came to this little congregation (several of us knowing the parties involved) that the one among us who would suffer this loss most is one among us who, as it is, has the least to lose, someone whose life has already been marked by neglect, abuse, and loss, I almost let it slip: “What the f...” that prophetic utterance that I apparently use to call out injustice or just general outrage, but that has no place in the pulpit before a worshipping congregation.

“Woe is me,” it becomes all too clear when you're in the presence of the holy and you speak like f-flipping degenerate—even if for good reason. No matter. It still makes you feel lousy. I mean, look what Mary managed to do when the angel Gabriel approached her that she'd bear a son though she was still but a girl: she sang out one of the most beautiful songs ever sung, harking back to what her tradition gave her, Hannah's also beautiful song from several centuries earlier. And here's me, dropping an f-bomb. Really? I can't do better than that? Woe is me. Get away from me, for I am a jerk.

But that's not why we're here. The response to Isaiah's woe that his speech had been as much profanity as prophecy until that point, and the response to Simon Peter's revulsion at Jesus, which was redounded revulsion as regards himself (“Get away from me for *I am bad!*): that's not why we're here. That's not what we're going to talk about. True as these things may be, that Isaiah swore like a sailor and that Simon Peter, though something of a sailor, was more generally just an impious, unimpressive guy, this is not what we're here to talk about. “We're here to talk about my

choosing you,” it’s as if God meant to imply to Isaiah, it’s as if Jesus meant to imply to Peter. “Be these things as they may, we’re here to talk about how the work of the divine in the world needs you, even though you’re potty-mouthed, even though you lack ambition, even though you’re chubby, even though you’re worn out, even though you’re inspiring sometimes but usually not, even though you’ve got a temper or you’re sort of lazy. Even though. Even though.”

This thing that we’ve perhaps each of us got most present on our minds, these imperfections that we parade around and that we’re so sure the whole world can’t help but to notice, like that zit on your nose or the toilet paper stuck to your shoe or the lettuce in your teeth or the back hem of your skirt tucked up into the waistband of your tights: “fine, whatever,” comes the divine call. “But I’m really going to need you to go to the people and bring with you my love for them, my warning, my hope.”

I find it touching—such magnanimity as makes our deepest insecurities the least interesting thing about us, such magnanimous regard as makes that one aspect of ourselves we find most loathsome and shameful actually so unimportant that it’s only hardly noticed, only summoned and spoken of to the most boring ends. Who cares that you’re imperfect, that you’re aging, that you’re recovering from any number of things, that you’re forgetful sometimes? So not important. What’s important is that you’re a vessel of love.

A man came into the bagel shop where I used to go when I was younger, a place near the beach whose owner was a surfer and whose counter staff looked ever-ready for a wind-and-waves photo shoot. It wasn’t necessarily a terrific place to load up on carbs, since everyone there had loaded up abs. Whatever. The bagels were good.

Leaving one day, I held the door behind me for a man also leaving. He looked flustered. “Wow,” he said, sort of breathless. “What do you think that girl sees through those eyes?”

“Because she’s pretty?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “Does everything look pretty to her? Or does everything look ugly?”

He seemed concerned about how he himself had looked to her, and not too interested in my thoughts on it all, though I had them, of course.

Wouldn’t it be good if beautiful eyes saw, *recognized* beauty everywhere? Wouldn’t it be good if beautiful people lent their beauty to world, if this were indeed one essential quality of beauty, a spirit of generosity and magnanimity, a gaze, a countenance of love?

What that man felt leaving the bagel shop we might well feel as well in church, where we court an encounter with the divine who is beauty, virtue, loveliness, a fullness of being. If we have a twinge of shame, let's read that as our coming close to all these things and recognizing where we fall short, and then let's let it go because God has other things on God's mind, less concerned with what embarrasses us and more concerned that we be God's people who do God's work of love in this world that God so loves.

Plus, the more time we spend amidst our aim, the more our aim become a fullness in us as well.

Thanks be to God.