

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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February 7, 2010
5th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Isaiah 6:1-8 & Luke 5:1-11

Into the Deep

The Bible is filled with call stories, where ordinary people are interrupted by God, called by God, and equipped by God to do what God has asked of them. Another recurring experience reported in the Bible are events called theophanies when God appears in a dramatic and transforming way to human beings. Often a theophany will precede a call from God. The stories we have just read from Isaiah and from Luke contain both of these elements—a theophany and a call.

In the case of Isaiah we find he is swept up in a vision of God's heavenly throne room in which the presence of God is made known by the strange and mystical winged creatures called seraphs that are said to be attending to God in all of God's holiness and glory. So enormous is God that this visualization of God allows for Isaiah to see only the hem of God's robe—basically from the knees down. This is just as well since in Isaiah's time it was believed that to see the face of God was to die. Isaiah describes this scene in language that evokes awe and wonder. The seraphs each have 6 wings. Each seraph uses two of the wings to fly and the other four to cover their feet and faces in the presence of God. "The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house was filled with smoke." (Is. 6:4). All of the rumbling and shaking, smoke and voices, conjure up an awesome experience for Isaiah. If you can recall from the movie the encounter Dorothy and her companions had with the Wizard of Oz in his chamber which is so splendidly portrayed on the silver screen, as terrifying as that was, it pales in comparison with the theophany experienced by Isaiah. And then the words of the seraphs that fill the chamber are, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." (Is. 6:3) So evocative is this description that it has been inspiration for art and music across the ages. The familiar great hymn with which we opened our service is one of the best known such examples. It is a hymn that in a small way captures the grandeur of Isaiah's experience and gives us a small taste of it, sweeping us up in awe and wonder as well.

The theophany in Luke's gospel is less mystical but no less awesome. This takes place early in Jesus' ministry, before he has selected any of the disciples to accompany him in his ministry. In this case Jesus at first appears as a traveling teacher, a rabbi, who has attracted attention and therefore a crowd of followers eager to hear his teaching. He comes to the sea of Galilee, called the lake of Gennesaret by Luke, where he sees some boats on the shoreline. So that he can speak to a larger number of people, he asks the fishermen to which the boats belong, if he can put out from shore a bit in one of them in order to teach, which is what he does. Now although the fishermen and others who were there listening to Jesus teach as he sat in the boat were surely experiencing a theophany since they were in the presence of Jesus, they didn't yet realize this. The true theophany of discovering God in Jesus had not yet happened, but it was about to. It's worth pointing out that Luke makes no mention of what Jesus taught the crowd from the boat that day. It's as if this first part of the story of Jesus teaching from the boat was pointing to the next part, prefatory to the theophany. While the fishermen were surely interested in and taken with his teaching, what really got their attention is in what happened after he taught. When Jesus had

shown up that day, it was in the morning after the fishermen had been out all night fishing, and in this case with nothing to show for it, no catch, no fish. So Jesus tells one of them, Simon, to get back in his boat and try one more time in the deep water. Although Simon is weary from a fishless night, he nevertheless complies and is stunned when his nets are filled with fish to the breaking point and that nearly sunk two boats. It was at this moment that this event becomes a theophany, for this teacher, this rabbi Jesus was seen in a whole new light in which he made himself to be something more, much more, than a good speaker. And Simon and the others are awestruck as this realization sinks in.

In both of these theophanies in which God is encountered—Isaiah in the throne room of God, and Simon and the other fishermen in their boats almost sinking from the miraculous catch of fish—the human witnesses become profoundly aware of their inadequate tininess in God’s awesome presence. Isaiah says, “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!” (Is. 6:5) And “. . .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.” (Lk. 5:8-9)

The reactions of Isaiah and of Simon are typical of those who report theophanies. The encounter with God is profoundly humbling. In such encounters there is no doubt of God’s supremacy. There is no doubt of the human smallness in relationship to God. Hence the falling down before God acknowledging this sharp contrast between God and human beings. But in these two instances as well as in many others in the Bible, God is not dissuaded from issuing a call to serve. God is not moved by their declarations of inadequacy. God instead pledges to equip them with what they need in order to carry out God’s call And in each case these became two of the most influential leaders of their time. Isaiah became a powerful mouthpiece of God, speaking truth to power and seeking to renew the faith of his people. Simon, who eventually took the name Peter became a foundational figure in the group of 12 disciples of Jesus as well as in the formation of the Christian church following Jesus’ departure from the scene.

How open are we today to the possibility of a theophany experience where God would break into our lives in a powerful and transforming way? While it’s not something that most of us come to church expecting, could it be something to which we would be open? We Presbyterians are especially prone to predictability and routine. But that doesn’t mean that we can’t or don’t experience God breaking through to us.

Today is the day for our annual meeting as a church family when we gather first for fellowship around tables and share in a simple meal together. That simple act of eating together is one way that we acknowledge our connection to and relationship with one another. We also gather to celebrate the many ways in which God has been active in our church as a people and in our church as an outpost for sharing God’s love in the world. The annual meeting is a chance to look back with thanksgiving and recognize how God has used us in being God’s agents and God’s hands. And while we give our thanks to God for another good year, we also look forward to the coming months of this year. We can look at plans and intentions, but we also look forward knowing that there will be unexpected ministry and mission successes as well as ministry and mission failures. But like Isaiah and like Simon and the other disciples we plunge into the future knowing that God the

Father goes before us, with God's son as our companion, and with God's Holy Spirit as our inspirer and cajoler making us open to new expressions of faith and mission.

There's one more part of these stories that we shouldn't miss. In both the call of Isaiah and the call of the disciples, the call from God is accompanied by the promise of provision for what is needed to carry out the call. This is most clearly demonstrated in the miraculous catch of fish that Simon and his companions experienced. After they have brought in the large catch, Jesus tells them that from now on they'll be fishing for people. The large catch symbolizes the scores of people who will be drawn into the group of those following Jesus. While these disciples will be the instruments of God, it will be by God's mercy and grace that there will be so many who choose to follow.

Even though the fishermen that day were said to have left everything on the shoreline behind them in order to follow Jesus, the large catch of fish is also a reminder that God will provide what is needed to carry on as they devote their lives to Jesus. It's the same reminder that we receive when we come to the table in the Lord's Supper and receive the bread and the cup. These communion elements do indeed represent the giving of Jesus' life for us in his body and blood, but perhaps equally important, they are a reminder of the sustenance that we receive in communion—sustenance for our spiritual lives and encouragement in our discipleship.

So come to this table today with an openness to God's working in your lives—working in ways that have been experienced as well as in new ways that we may not have yet experienced.