

LORD OF THE CATCH

Luke 5:1-11

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany (Series C)

February 10, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 5, verses 1 through 11. It is on page 728 of the pew Bible. In this Gospel lesson, one of Jesus' disciples has an experience very similar to the one Isaiah had in the Old Testament lesson. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 5, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, ² and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³ Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. ⁴ And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." ⁵ And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." ⁶ And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. ⁷ They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸ But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." ⁹ For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, ¹⁰ and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men." ¹¹ And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the Second Century AD, there was a guy by the name of Marcion. Marcion wasn't exactly a Christian, but he was the inventor of a Christian heresy, which is to say, his teachings had similarities to Christianity, but they were perverted enough to not be the same thing anymore. Among his false doctrines, Marcion taught that the God in the Old Testament is not the same as the God in the New Testament. Marcion believed there are two gods. The Old Testament god, Marcion believed, was harsh and vengeful. But the New Testament god, whom Marcion believed to not be Jesus himself, but only Jesus' father, is gracious and forgiving. The gospel in Marcion's heresy is that the New Testament god overrules the Old Testament god.

Marcion obviously had trouble reconciling the wrath of God with the love of God. He also, apparently, did not spend enough time reading either the Old Testament or the New Testament, because we find both the wrath of God and the love of God on full display in both.

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Marcion's teachings were rejected by the rest of the Church as heresy, but they haven't really gone away. It's still quite common to have trouble reconciling the wrath of God and the love of God. It can be hard to understand how both can come from the same God.

The fundamental error—and this is the fundamental error of many heresies—is underestimating the sinfulness of mankind. When we actually recognize our own depravity, we can easily see that God's wrath is completely justified in every circumstance. And, not only that, but his love is then seen to be immeasurably rich.

We see all of this on display in both the Old Testament lesson (Is. 6:1-13) and the Gospel lesson. In both lessons, God appears to his servant, the servant is overwhelmed with fear being in the presence of God, but God absolves his servant and sends him to preach his Word.

In the Old Testament lesson it's the prophet Isaiah. He saw a vision of the Lord sitting on his throne. It was a glorious and terrifying sight. Not only did his glory fill the temple, but it filled the entire earth.

And there were angels flying around. This particular kind of angel is called a seraph. Seraphim do not look like Christmas tree ornaments. From Isaiah's description, they sound glorious, but also a bit terrifying. They have six wings, but only two of them are used for flying. Two wings are used to cover their faces. I suppose the purpose of this is either to shield us from their appearance, or to shield themselves from the glory of the LORD. I'm not sure which. The last two wings are used to cover their feet. I don't know why, but there's probably a good reason.

These creatures would be enough to frighten me, but Isaiah is not frightened by the Seraphim. He is frightened by the presence of the LORD. The LORD is holy. This is what one of the Seraphim says: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is filled with his glory!" (Is. 6:3). And Isaiah says, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Is. 6:5).

It's not just that God is holy, and it's not just that Isaiah is a sinful man; it's that both of these things are true, and Isaiah has seen the LORD with his own eyes. God said that man shall not see him and live (Ex. 33:20). But now Isaiah has seen the LORD. This adds up to a death sentence.

And there is something about seeing God that always brings to mind a person's sin. It's like a penetrating light that exposes everything. Not only does it reveal what is on the outside, but it also reveals what is on the inside. And you know this is happening. Imagine how many of your former sins would come to mind if you saw God face to face. We sin so often that we push our sins out of our minds. We have to or else we would be so stricken with guilt we wouldn't be able to function. So we learn how to forget about our sins, and we quickly move on to the next one. They're done, and we convince ourselves they are forgotten. Most of the time no one ever knows about them. But imagine what you would feel if you found yourself face to face with God. You think to yourself, *This is the person who told me not to do all those evil things, but I did them anyway, and he knows it, because he knows everything.* God knows them all, and you know that he knows them all, so you start to remember all the sins you tried to forget. There's no escaping it, and there's no way to justify yourself, because God knows our evil intentions too. It won't work to say, "I didn't mean to do it," because God knows we did.

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This is Isaiah's experience. He sees God, and he is certain this will be his doom. But God has other plans. He absolves Isaiah of his sin, and he does it in an interesting way. A seraph flies to him with a burning coal from the altar. He touches it to Isaiah's lips and says, "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for" (Is. 6:7).

This thing about the coal is very curious. How does this coal remove Isaiah's sins? What does this mean? Maybe it's discipline, kind of like the Roman Catholic idea of purgatory, or the way your mom made you wash your mouth out with soap when you said something bad. By the way, I don't think my mom ever did that to me. Isaiah sinned with his mouth, so maybe now he needs to get burned on his lips to purge his sins away. Probably not. Isaiah doesn't say anything about how it felt, or that he got burned. It's not a punishment.

The key to understanding it is the altar. The altar is the place of atonement. Isaiah's sins aren't atoned for when the coal touches his mouth. Isaiah's sins are atoned for at the altar, and the coal simply delivers this forgiveness from the altar to Isaiah. Now this isn't the altar at the temple in Jerusalem where the blood of bulls and goats and sheep was sprinkled. This is the altar in heaven, where Christ entered, once for all, into the holy places and presented his own blood to make atonement for all sins (Heb. 9:2, 24-28). That's the only blood to ever touch this altar. Isaiah can't go to the altar, but the coal delivers the atonement from the altar to Isaiah. This is just like how the Word and Sacraments function for us. We can't go to the cross, and we can't ascend to the altar in heaven, so God has instituted these means to bring the atonement to us. Forgiveness is delivered through these means, just like the coal that touched Isaiah's lips.

So God sends the atonement out to Isaiah, and he is absolved. Then Isaiah's posture before the LORD is completely transformed. He goes from terrified to eager. Instead of cowering in fear, he volunteers himself for the LORD's service.

The LORD gives him a mission, and I wonder how many times throughout his life Isaiah regretted his decision to volunteer, because it wasn't a happy mission. "Go, and say to this people:

" 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand;
keep on seeing, but do not perceive.'
Make the heart of this people dull,
and their ears heavy,
and blind their eyes;
lest they see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.'" (Is. 6:8-9)

In short, Isaiah's mission was to preach the Word of God until the people's hearts became calloused to it. Instead of the Word resulting in repentance, it would produce dullness. This seems kind of strange, because we expect that the Word of God should always have a positive effect, but it doesn't. Sometimes it has a negative effect, and that's what God is saying here to Isaiah. I remember one of my seminary professors telling us that God's Word always does one of two things to people. It either works repentance, or it dulls their hearts, but it's never benign. You can embrace it, or you can reject it, but you cannot be neutral to it. And, like most

of the Old Testament prophets, Isaiah's message will fall on hard hearts and make them even harder.

Isaiah's task is not a happy one, so he asks, "How long, O Lord?" (6:11). That is, *How long do I have to do this? When can I stop?* And God says, "Until cities lie waste" (6:11). And when there is just a remnant left, "It will be burned again" (6:13). There will be nothing left but a stump. But this stump is the holy seed, that is Christ, who will sprout and grow into the kingdom Isaiah longed to see, but that will be someone else's message to proclaim. Isaiah's task was a sad and fruitless one.

The gospel lesson is very similar in many respects. God appears to his servant, the servant is overwhelmed with fear being in the presence of God, but God absolves his servant and sends him to preach his Word. In this case it's Simon. His other name, which is more familiar to us, is Peter.

This is often considered to be the calling of the first disciples, but it's not, really. Simon already knew Jesus. In the chapter before, Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law (4:38). And Simon had already been learning from Jesus. That's what a disciple is. Some people will try to tell you that a disciple is someone who follows Jesus. That's not quite true. Disciples do happen to follow Jesus, but that's not really what it means to be a disciple. The Greek word, which we translate as "disciple" (μαθητής), literally means "learner." That's what a disciple is. It's someone who learns from Jesus. In this respect, Jesus had—and continues to have—many disciples. You and I are disciples. The special office that Simon Peter was called to is that of apostle. That is what Jesus would train the twelve to be.

I won't recount the story for you. You heard it already. The really remarkable thing is the way Simon reacts to the miracle. Jesus had just blessed him with a literal boatload of fish. The haul was so great that his craft was in peril of sinking. But Simon is concerned, neither with the big pay day, nor the possible loss of his business, but with his own sin and the identity of the man standing in front of him. He fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (5:8). Simon politely asks Jesus to leave. Why? This is Simon's Isaiah experience. He comes to face to face with God, and he is brought to nothing. He can't stand being in the presence of Jesus' holiness.

Notice the way Simon's title for Jesus changes. Before the great catch, he called Jesus, "Master." Now he calls him, "Lord." So what? The two words seem like synonyms, but they are more different than we immediately realize. Simon's title for Jesus changes from a generic term for master (ἐπιστάτης), to the word the Jews used to translate the divine name Yahweh (κύριος) from Hebrew into Greek. And here's the point: Simon learns that Jesus is no ordinary master; he is the God of heaven and earth. He is the same LORD who told Moses to take his sandals off, because he was on holy ground (Ex. 3:5). This is the same LORD Isaiah saw seated on the throne. And now he's standing in Simon's boat with fish up to his knees.

And Simon has the same reaction Isaiah had. He is ruined. He actually asks Jesus to leave, because he can't stand being in the presence of his holiness. It's that moment where his entire life—or, at least, the shameful parts of it—flashed before his eyes. Imagine the feeling of guilt you would have if some random person revealed to you that they know about something you thought was a secret. Now imagine that person is God. That's what Simon is experiencing. The

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God who issued the commandments and knows how Simon has broken them is so close he can touch him. Imagine this. We would be ruined too.

But Jesus graciously declines Simon's request that he should leave. Instead, he stays and absolves him. **"Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men"** (5:10). It's a lot like Isaiah's experience. In the time it takes Jesus to utter this sentence, Simon Peter goes from doomed to forgiven and called into the ministry of preaching the Word.

But there's one key difference between Isaiah's call and Simon's call. Whereas Isaiah's was rather pessimistic, Simon's is completely optimistic. **"From now on you will be catching men."** We have a tendency to read that as a command, but it's not; it's a promise. Jesus is telling him that he will catch men. Simon Peter will preach the Word of God, and sinners will hear it and repent.

And if Simon had asked, "How long, O Lord?" I suppose Jesus would have said, "Until the Gospel is proclaimed to the ends of the earth." Simon actually accomplished this in one sermon. It was fifty days after Jesus' death and resurrection, and only ten days after his ascension into heaven. There were devout men from every nation under heaven gathered in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost (Acts 2:5). Simon preached about how Jesus had fulfilled the Old Testament, how he is the Son of God, how his own people had him crucified, and how he had risen from the dead. The people were cut to the heart. They asked Peter what they should do. He said repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38). They did, and three thousand souls were added to the Church that day (Acts 2:41). Why? Was it because Peter was a really great preacher? No. Jesus told him what to do, he did it, and the Holy Spirit produced the results. It was all a matter of Jesus' promise.

This is the difference between Isaiah and Simon Peter. And this is the general difference between the prophets in the Old Testament and the apostles in the New Testament. God is the same. The message is even the same. The prophets simply preached Christ before his death and resurrection, while the apostles preached him after the fact. But the results are different. Before, the people of Israel wouldn't even believe it. Now the Gospel has gone to the farthest corners of the world, and people of every nation and tribe believe it and are saved. This is because of two things: the promise of Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. It's just like the great catch of fish. We do what Jesus tells us to do, and we trust him with the results.

We rejoice that God has sent the Gospel of Jesus Christ even to us. And we rejoice that the Holy Spirit has created faith through it. Like that coal that was carried to Isaiah's lips, God's Word has been carried to our ears. The waters of Baptism have joined us to Jesus in his death and resurrection. Bread and wine deliver the body and blood of Jesus to our lips. We rejoice because God has used these things to bring the atonement of Jesus Christ to us, and he has removed our guilt. We rejoice that God is still doing this, all around the world and right next door. So we pray also that we might be used as Peter was, to cast a net and catch what the Holy Spirit brings in. We do this until the Last Day comes and we all gather around the throne to hear the Seraphim cry,

"Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come" (Rev. 4:8).

Being cleansed by the blood of Jesus, this will not cause us to fear. We will rejoice in his holiness, because his righteousness is given to us. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.