

HOLINESS AND MERCY

Luke 5:1-11

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany (Series C)

February 9, 2025

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 5, verses 1 through 11. 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.

Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

You may be seated.

The sermon today is based both on the Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 6, which we read earlier, and this gospel lesson from Luke 5. There are two major themes that feature prominently in both lessons: the holiness of God and his calling of prophets and apostles to proclaim his Word.

In the Old Testament lesson Isaiah 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. Isaiah was ruined. He said, "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 Isaiah feels it.

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—that's a kind of angel—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? Is it a punishment, like Isaiah needs to feel some pain on his mouth to atone for his sins? No. Isaiah doesn't even say anything about how it felt, or that he got burned.

The key to understanding it is the altar. The altar is the place of atonement. Isaiah's sins aren't really atoned for when the coal touches his mouth. Isaiah's sins are atoned for at the altar, and the coal delivers this forgiveness from the altar to Isaiah. 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. The coal delivers the atonement from the altar to Isaiah. This is similar to 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. 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 fell on hard hearts and make them even harder.

Isaiah asked, "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.

HOLINESS AND MERCY (Luke 5:1-11)

The Gospel lesson is similar in many ways. This exchange between Simon Peter and Jesus is one of my favorites. And I feel like I say that a lot, but when we realize that the whole Bible is about the almighty and gracious God interacting with humanity, every part of it really has the power to captivate our minds. And Jesus' exchange here with Peter is just so interesting. Peter comes face to face with God, and it terrifies him, but Jesus does not let him remain in that terror. And from the way that Jesus deals with Peter, we learn the way that he also deals with us. God is always merciful to the humble. That is one immutable law of God's nature.

Peter was already a disciples of Jesus. We know that from the Gospel of John (1:40-42). So Peter already knew that Jesus is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29), and he knew that Jesus is the Christ (1:41). And in this passage from Luke, even before the miraculous catch of fish, Peter called Jesus "master" (5:5). So he's already a disciple of Jesus, and he knows at least something of who Jesus really is. But there's something more that Peter learns from this experience. It's like Peter knew all about Jesus with his brain, but there's something that he had not yet seen or experienced. There's something more to faith than mere knowledge of the facts. There's a fear, love, and trust that God must work in our hearts. And maybe Peter hadn't quite experienced that yet. But when he saw the great catch of fish, more of it clicked in both his mind and his heart. He knew in the core of his being that this man in his fishing boat is no ordinary man, but he is God. He is the LORD, Yahweh, who created the world and everything in it, who redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt, and who spoke by the prophets in the Old Testament. The God of heaven and earth is right there in his boat.

How would you feel in that moment? Peter was ruined, much like the prophet Isaiah was. He was confronted with the awful holiness of the one true God, he remembered his own sin, and he was reduced to nothing. He fell down at Jesus' knees and prayed. He prayed for the only thing that he felt could save him: for Jesus to go away. He said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (5:8). And this does not mean that Peter had committed some heinous crime like murder. From everything we know, Peter was an ordinary and pious Jewish man. There was probably nothing about him that we would have found scandalous. He might have been just like you and me. But he felt the same way we all would if we experienced what he did.

I don't know if you've ever had an experience like this before. I actually hope you have, just not too often. Perhaps you have experienced this recognition of God's holiness and purity while also remembering your own sin. And there's this terrifying realization that someone sees everything about us. He sees our actions done in secret. He sees through the excuses we make to justify ourselves. He sees the thoughts and intentions that lie behind everything we do. And in those moments, we're ruined like Isaiah and Peter were. And we feel like we need to get as far away from God as possible. It's the same way Adam and Eve felt in the garden after they sinned, when they hid themselves among the trees (Gen. 3:8). It's kind of like the way children might hide when they've done something that they feel their parents will disapprove of. And they're either afraid of punishment, or they just don't want to see their parents disappointed in them, because that feels like an assault on our souls. Sometimes you might be so ashamed before God that, even if you know about forgiveness, you don't actually want it. Forgiveness for whatever it is that we have done might offend our own sense of justice. We think, *I know that what I've done is wrong, and I do not deserve forgiveness, so if I were God, I would not forgive me.* So we might think that there's just no way God could actually forgive us. Or we might feel that we would actually think less of him if he forgave us, because it feels so unjust. So even though we are selfish people, and we would like to get off the hook, there comes a point sometimes when we're

just not comfortable with forgiveness. And so, like Peter, we just want God to go away. We feel like there wouldn't be a problem if God just wasn't there.

For Peter, the scene kind of traps him. And I think Jesus designed it this way. They're in a boat. Luke calls this "the lake of Gennesaret." That's just another name for the Sea of Galilee, which is more of a large lake than it is an actual sea. Still, Peter is trapped. He is surrounded by water all around him. And we know they're not near the shore, because Jesus told him to **"Put out into the deep"** (5:4). Peter has nowhere to go. Or maybe he has two undesirable options before him: deal with this holy and righteous God, or jump into the sea and try to make the long swim to shore. So he prays, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." In that moment, that is the prayer of his heart. He wants God to go away and leave him alone. He feels that the only way he can survive and exist is to be as far away from God as possible. But, graciously, Jesus does not answer his prayer.

I have heard it said, and perhaps you have heard this as well, concerning freewill and faith, that Jesus is a perfect gentleman, and he will not insist on being somewhere he is not invited. Well that's just not true. In this sense, Jesus is no gentleman at all. He is jealous for you. And praise God that he is. If Jesus and his Holy Spirit left us alone whenever we try to hide from them, none of us would be Christians. He pursues us when we do not want him. And when we ask him to leave, he does not. He did not leave Peter. He did not answer Peter's prayer as Peter wished. And he will not leave you either. You may try to cut him off. You may even think you have succeeded. But you cannot put God far away from you. It's kind of like how a two-year-old might say, "Daddy, go away." A good father will not give that child what she wants. He might stay in the same place and deal with her. Or he might go and stand in the doorway for a minute, letting her calm down. But he will not leave his child. So also, your God, when you run and hide from him, or when you try to push him away, he does not give you what you want. Even then, his promise remains that **"He will not leave you or forsake you"** (Deut. 31:6, 8, 1 Chr. 28:20; Heb. 13:5). He remains, and he pursues you, in order to reconcile you to himself.

Jesus stayed, and he did what Peter thought impossible: Jesus absolved him. He said, **"Do not be afraid"** (5:10). Peter felt that Jesus would destroy him for his sin, but Peter need not fear this, and neither do you. **"God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him"** (3:17). And there was a change in Peter's heart. Jesus brought peace. When they got to the shore, Peter and the others did not try to get away from Jesus. Instead, **"they left everything and followed him"** (5:11). This is the change we should all experience. The presence of God is not a threat to us. He is our safety. We should want to be in his presence always. And if we understood him rightly, we would want to. It is only lies and misunderstandings that inspire us to want to hold him at a distance. Yes, we are sinful, as Peter was, but Jesus does not come to us in order to punish those sins, but to release us from them.

Imagine you're in some old timey prison, because you committed a crime, and you've been sentenced to death. You're locked up in chains awaiting your execution. That's like the way our sins hold us. And you see a strong man coming toward you with a key. Naturally, you think that he is the executioner, and your time has come. So you fear. And that is the way we feel when God comes near. But this man does not come to finish you. He comes to set you free. We fear only because we misunderstand what God wants with us. We know what we deserve. But Jesus has already suffered and died for us. He has forgiven your sins. He has taken away your guilt. It would be unjust for God to hold sins against you that Jesus has paid for in full, so **"God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"** (1 John 1:9).

HOLINESS AND MERCY (Luke 5:1-11)

So Jesus absolves Peter, and he calls him into his service. The big difference between Isaiah and Peter is that Isaiah's call is very pessimistic. The LORD tells Isaiah that the people's hearts will be dull (Is. 6:10). But Jesus' call of Peter is much more optimistic. It's even a promise: **"From now on you will be catching men"** (5:10). And, as history has demonstrated, it was true.

On Pentecost, just fifty days after Jesus' resurrection and ten days after his ascension into heaven, Peter preached to a great crowd and three thousand souls were baptized and added to the Church in a single day (Acts 2:41). And from there, the good news of Jesus Christ quickly spread all around the world.

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. But now we see how God's love has been manifested in the death and resurrection of Jesus. We see what God did to atone for our sins. And since the atonement, God sends his Holy Spirit to work repentance in our hearts.

So do not resist him. When you feel the weight of your sin, and when you sense that God is looking right though you, do not hide. No one can hide from his presence. Confess your sin. Pray, "Lord, have mercy." And God's answer to that prayer is always certain, because Jesus has atoned for all your sins. **"Do not be afraid"** (Luke 5:10). And "Your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for" (Is. 6:7). Amen.

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