

“Send Me”

Valley Presbyterian Church – February 7, 2010

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Isaiah 6:1-8

Rev. John Wahl

Luke 5:1-11

For much of my childhood, my Uncle Howard was my oldest living relative. He was a skilled tradesman, a life-long member of the Plumber’s Union and not only fixed leaky faucets in people’s homes, but worked on many of the largest building projects in town. He was one of those people who never really retired; always finding an odd job here or there, tinkering in one place or another.

But there was no question that Uncle Howard’s true passion was fishing. No matter what time of year, no matter what might be going on in his life, he could be seen driving around with a fishing boat tied to the top of his car; a simple, aluminum rowboat that he could still lift on and off even into his eighties. Whenever he had free time and there was a lake nearby, he would simply pull over and bring the boat down and set it afloat. Often, the mere presence of that boat atop his car served as a conversation-starter with friends and strangers alike, who would surely receive an invitation to come out and fish with him.

Jesus offers an invitation to fishermen, but of a different kind. As they were cleaning their nets – ready to put away their tools until another day – Jesus suggests that they go back out to the deep waters and drop their nets again. Simon Peter – experienced at his craft and undoubtedly tired from a long night and empty nets – gives his assessment of the situation before conceding to give it another try. “Master,” he says, “we have worked all night long, but have caught nothing. Yet, if you say so, I will let down the nets.”

When the catch became so abundant that the boats began to sink, Peter turns to Jesus and gives voice to his fear. “Go away from me, Lord,” he tells Jesus, for “I am a sinful man.” Leave me alone, he was trying to say to Jesus, and just let me do what I know how to do; fish for fish. For, in the presence of Jesus and his summons to become a fisher of people, Peter felt unskilled, inexperienced and inadequate. But, Jesus neither abandons Peter

nor condemns him for his fear. Instead Jesus stands next to his new disciple and says, “Don’t be afraid.” And from that day on, Jesus continues to guide, inspire and teach him every day.¹

Both of the passages that we heard this morning fall into the biblical genre of “call stories.” The recipients of these calls – Isaiah and Simon Peter – are biblical giants. We cannot read about their entrance into ministry without also remembering their great acts of faith – and their notable episodes of doubt. Much is expected of both Isaiah and Peter, but not out of proportion to what they have been given. God remains with them, through thick and thin.

We are told that when Isaiah is called, he is only a boy – probably around the age of the youth who have been served as worship liturgists this morning. Isaiah’s response to God’s call, “Here I am, send me,” reveals his youthful innocence. And it will be his sustained vision over many decades of ministry – although sometimes discouraged to point that he wanted to quit – that allows him to dream about the day when the lion will lay peacefully with the lamb and swords are beaten into plowshares.

We are also told much about what Peter will say and do after dropping his nets and following Jesus. We know that he steps out in faith to walk on the water with Jesus, but begins to sink when he doubts. We know he is the first of the disciples to recognize Jesus as Messiah and Lord, but also the one who denies his Lord three times, and fears that betrayal will be his final legacy. But Jesus never lets Peter sink: his love and hope for Peter stays steady. In their last encounter, Peter is able to say to Jesus: “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Fear is a powerful force but, in the end, love is stronger.

In the midst of failure, Jesus asks Peter to go deeper, not only into the lake waters but also into his experience of God’s abundant and caring inspiration. Jesus presents Peter with the vision of a deeper reality that embraces both his failed efforts as well as God’s surprising and infinite bounty.

During difficult times, we are tempted to assume that our resources have all been exhausted. At such moments, we are reminded that we live in

¹ Wendy Miller, “Facing our Fears” in *Lectionary Homiletics*, Feb. 2004

a world characterized more by abundance than scarcity. When we go deeper in truth and faith, we discover new resources, energy and inspiration to deal with challenges.²

We sometimes do a disservice to the call to discipleship when we simply translate it as fishing for people. Literally, Jesus says to Peter that from now on he will be “taking men and women alive;” capturing them for the kingdom. This is a very different image from catching them as though they are food to be consumed. The kingdom requires not dead fish, but human beings that are fully alive – not creatures that are writhing in the last gasps before death, but people living the life of good news in all its fullness.³

I think my Uncle Howard was a people-catcher in this best sense. Rare was the day when he did not have a nephew or neighbor serving as his apprentice. Having lived through the difficult days of the Great Depression, he saw it as a part of his vocation not just to invite others to fish with him, but also to help them discover their own vocation and their own pathway to relational ministry. Simon Peter and his co-workers may have been asked to leave their nets behind, but the work of “catching” is not so much rejected as transformed. Theirs was now a vocation within the reign of God. By catching, Peter does his work within the broader context of God’s work.

In this way our jobs – those we are paid to do as well as our jobs within families, churches and communities – become our vocation, our calling. Our jobs can also be broadened to the point that we can see our labor as part in the work of God’s coming reign. In Peter’s case, it meant leaving the boat. In our case, it may mean staying where we are physically, but seeing – through a spiritual imagination – that what we do is no longer life-taking, but life-giving and life-saving.⁴

May God lead us to find our passion in the sharing of the good news in the world. May we be people-fishers for Christ – not with bait and lures – but with the love and mercy of God which comes to us in abundance, threatening to break our nets, even when we are tired or discouraged or expect it the least. For in those deep waters, Jesus comes. AMEN.

² Bruce Epperly in *Christian Century*, Jan. 26, 2010

³ Peter Eaton in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol. 1

⁴ Ronald Cole-Turner in *Lectionary Homiletics*, Feb. 2004