

Isaiah 6:1-8
Psalm 138
Luke 5:1-11

Out Into the Deep

A lot of my friends go on cruises and they are always trying to get me to sign on with them. Aside from the fact I have absolutely no time and no money to go on a cruise anywhere there is a little problem with the entire concept. I get deathly seasick. I get seasick on the wonderful ferries this region is so famous for (seasick tablets in my glove box at all times for the times I need to go on one.) I can't even swing because it goes backwards some of the time. Nope, no way, Jose am I going to spend all that money just to lie in bed and moan and wish I were dead. My Aunt and Uncle owned a motel in Florida when I was young and we would go there every year for a vacation. I love the ocean - as long as I am looking at it or swimming in it and not floating on it. Well, one day the family chartered a fishing boat and everyone had to go out to do the fishing thing. I was reluctant but all my cousins were going so what the hey. No sooner had we left the dock the I knew I had made a horrendous mistake. And there we were well out on the water and the waves tossing the boat back and forth, back and forth, back and forth ... you get the picture - I began to feed the fishes in a way not associated with a hook or net. I was reduced to clutching the small bench in the cabin and praying to God that I would die. That was my last time on a fishing boat. I had put out into the deep and it was a disaster. So when I read about Peter and James and John leaving their boats and following Jesus I don't have the wonder many people have. I can absolutely relate - I'd have followed Jesus anywhere in a heart beat if the choice was going out on a boat or wandering through wilderness with a guy I didn't really know that well.

But that is not really what the experience is all about for Peter or James and John or even Isaiah and the psalmist. They all have an experience of the holy and in that experience they are called out into the deep - into the deep of their lives, into the deep of their souls, into the deep of their very beings and out of that deep place in their lives they respond to the call of the transforming, awesome, holy one - Here am I, send me.

Simon Peter and his colleagues are drying their nets after a frustrating night of fruitless fishing. Jesus appears and has Simon row him out a bit so he can address the pressing crowd with greater clarity. You see water acts as a natural conduit for sound. At the end of his talk, Jesus tells Simon to let down his nets in deep waters for a catch. Though all night Simon has batted zero in catching fish, he still does so. The result is such a catch of fish that his boat and his partners' boat both begin to sink.

Simon Peter's reaction to the catch is not joy but fear. Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man. This seems a curious response. To understand better we need to know a bit more about Peter and what has been going on in his life recently.

Earlier in Luke's gospel, a part skipped over by the lectionary folks this year, Jesus enters the small Galilean town of Capernaum. There Jesus stays at the home of Simon Peter's mother-in-law. Since this was the house that would later become the headquarters for Jesus and his disciples, it's quite possible that Peter and his wife lived there with her mother. Now, there's nothing wrong with you and your wife living with her mother, but in a man's world of the Bible, living with your mother-in-law doesn't exactly label you a rousing success. This is further hinted at in that Simon didn't own his own business. Instead he worked with the sons of Zebedee, James and John, under their daddy's watchful eye.

According to Luke's gospel, things were not going well in the mother-in-law's house. On the day that Jesus stays with them his mother-in-law is seriously ill with a wracking fever. Jesus rebukes the fever and heals her.

Now as we move into the heart of our lesson for today, we see Simon Peter's bad week becoming worse. He was living with his mother-in-law, working for The Sons of Zebedee Fishing Company, and now he strikes out by not catching a single fish in a night of intense labor. To Simon Peter fishing was not a way to pass a pleasant summer evening, it was his livelihood. In Galilee, fish were eaten, processed, salted, pickled, and even exported.

Simon had not caught any fish and Luke uses the word KOPOS to describe his feeling. KOPOS means toil and weariness, as if one has been beaten. It was not for lack of effort that Simon had failed. He'd fished all night long. He'd used the trammel net, designed to catch fish in the deepest part of the sea, but all he had to show for his efforts were empty nets which needed drying.

It is in this sense of weariness and failure that Jesus meets Jesus. He lives with a sick mother-in-law. He works for someone else. And he had experienced a dreadful night on the job. Simon was soul searching, struggling with his identity. He was out in the deep in more ways than one.

Failure. Have you ever known failure? Have you ever felt you were a failure? Have you had nights when the fish just don't bite? I have. I have felt I was a failure. I have been like Simon Peter toiling all night, giving my best, maybe working too hard, yet at the end of the day, my nets felt empty.

WE all fail at times. There are nights when the fish just don't bite. Nights when we feel we are out in the depths. That's why we need to hear the rest of this morning's reading. Jesus doesn't let Simon's apparent failure in fishing prevent him from becoming the leader of Jesus' chosen 12. He may have failed in one day of fishing. That did not mean he was a failure in life.

After Jesus has finished speaking he tells Simon to cast his net and to expect to have a catch. Now remember, Simon's just spent an entire night fishing and failing, and surely, the last thing he wanted to do was fish some more. When one is pounding one's head against a brick wall, one doesn't relish more pain. If I'd been Simon I might have responded to Jesus' invitation by turning him down with one of the catch phrases of our time. Been there, done that, got the t shirt. But Simon has more character than most people. He says yes to Jesus: At your word I will let down my nets. Simon had the courage to try again.

Good things did happen. Simon wanted fish: he got fish! He got so many fish that he nearly sank the entire fleet of Zebedee and Sons fishing! This was the most successful day in Simon Peter's life and yet ... he walked away from it all. This is what is staggering about this story.

When Jesus told him he had other plans for him, Peter walked away from the only livelihood that he knew. Simon Peter had come to that critical point in every thinking person's life where he realizes that everything material he'd ever wanted just wasn't enough. Simon's hunger is not for lake trout. His hunger is for God. He has entered the deep place in his life and his soul. And thus he collapses at Jesus' feet and confesses I am a sinner.

What happened to Simon parallels what happened to Isaiah in the year that King Uzziah died. Isaiah, the consummate temple priest, finely tuned in the rituals of piety and worship, competently doing holy things in holy places, Isaiah finally experiences what the holy is all about. He has a vision and it blows his mind. There - high and lofty is God - filling the throne - a luxurious velvet robe covering the sanctuary floor. There is smoke and voices and 6 winged angels flying around. This polished professional priest all of a sudden feels awkward, overwhelmed, swept into a place he cannot control, a situation he cannot understand, out into the deep.

Isaiah's first response is guilt, unworthiness, a sense of bewilderment. Woe is me! I am lost! I am unclean. But God does not let Isaiah drown in that deep any more than Jesus did Simon Peter. That is God's way. God does not confront us with threats but with goodness. Isaiah's lips are touched and when God asks Whom shall I send? Isaiah, through charred, sore lips cries, Here am I. Send me. God has called Isaiah out of the depths of his sense of

unworthiness into a full sense of his identity as beloved of God. With that sense and identity Isaiah could face the opposition that comes with being a prophet.

The psalmist knew this full well. In this morning's psalm, the psalmist is giving thanks to God with his whole heart for God's steadfast love and faithfulness. At the heart of this thanksgiving is the affirmation: On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul. Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me. The psalmist knows and affirms that God provides as well as calls, knows that we are never left out in the deep alone. And the psalmist knows that God has a purpose for him. That is the greatest of all affirmations - and one we need to remember deep in our souls. God has a purpose for each of us - Isaiah, Peter, us. WE may not be fully aware of it, it may call us to a place we never thought of going, but we know we will hear the question: Whom shall I send? And what will our answer be?

It is not going to be easy to listen to God's call. Our insecurity, our self doubt, and our great need for affirmation can make us lose trust in our inner voice and run away from ourselves and sink out in the deep. But we know that God is speaking to us through our inner voice and we know that we will find joy and peace only if we follow it. We have friends who know that our inner voice speaks the truth and who can affirm what it says. We need to trust these people who know our inner journey and who want us to be faithful to it. These are the friends who will help us stay faithful to God's call. I hope that you find some of those friends in this congregation, that we as a congregation can be the place where people are affirmed and loved into their calling, where we can come when we feel most out in the deep and find something to cling to that is life-giving. And then we can say: yes, we'll put our nets in one more time, here we are, all children of God, send us. And sustained by the community that gathers to share a life transforming meal together we can cast our nets out and gather in a world that is lost out in the deep and bring it to the shore of justice and love and liberation.