

“A Big Fish Story That’s Not About Fish”

5 Epiphany C

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Rev. Dr. David Gardner Tweed

First Reading: Isaiah 6:1-8 [9-13]

Through a vision in the temple, the eighth-century prophet Isaiah is called by God to announce judgment against Israel. Aware of his sinfulness & shortcomings, Isaiah is initially hesitant. But when God calls, Isaiah responds, “Here am I; send me!”

¹In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high & lofty; & the hem of The Lord's robe filled the temple. ²Seraphs were in attendance above the Lord; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, & with two they covered their feet, & with two they flew. ³& one called to another & said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of the glory of the Lord.”

⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, & the house filled with smoke. ⁵& I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, & I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the Sovereign, the Lord of hosts!” ⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷The seraph touched my mouth with it & said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed & your sin is blotted out.” ⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, & who will go for us?” & I said, “Here am I; send me!” [⁹& the Lord said, “Go & say to this people: ‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.’ ¹⁰Make the mind of this people dull, & stop their ears, & shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, & listen with their ears, & comprehend with their minds, & turn & be healed.”

¹¹Then I said, “How long, O Lord?” & the Lord said: “Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, & houses without people, & the l& is utterly desolate;

¹²until the Lord sends everyone far away, & vast is the emptiness in the midst of the l&.

¹³Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing

when it is felled.” The holy seed is its stump.

Gospel: Luke 5:1-11

Jesus’ teaching of God’s word has begun to draw great crowds. For Simon, James, & John, Jesus’ teaching inspires hospitality, then obedience, & then risk. After Jesus’ creative power is revealed, fear & amazement leads these three fishermen to leave everything behind to become apostles.

¹Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, & the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, ²he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; those who were fishing had gone out of the boats & were washing their nets. ³Jesus got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, & asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down & taught the crowds from the boat. ⁴When Jesus had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water & let down your nets for a catch.” ⁵Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” ⁶When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. ⁷So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come & help them. & they came & filled both boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” ⁹For Simon & all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; ¹⁰& so also were James & John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching human beings.” ¹¹When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything & followed Jesus.

Overview - God’s Imperfect People

“Go in peace, share the good news.” Week after week Christians gather together, hear the word proclaimed, share a meal, & are sent out to bear the good news of God in Christ Jesus to a hungry, needy world. We may wonder why God has given such an important mission to people like us. God’s prophets & apostles carried the same anxieties. Isaiah declares, “I am a man of unclean lips.” Paul asserts, “I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” Peter responds to Jesus’ miracle of plenty by saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” Yet, without question, God used these flawed & fragile human beings to proclaim God’s mercy & love. In a world where we are constantly being told that we are insufficient—that we do not have enough, know enough, or matter enough—God’s trust in our capacities seems imprudent, even irrational. But notice, Jesus precedes a call to discipleship with a miracle pointing to God’s abundant provision, signaling that we will be given all we need. Martin Luther writes in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, “What I accept, I accept not on my own merits or by any right that I may personally have to it. I know that I am receiving more than a worthless one like me deserves; indeed, I have deserved the very opposite. But I claim what I claim by the right of a bequest & of another’s goodness” (*Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy Lull [Mnpls: Fortress Press, 1989]). Jesus meets us at the shorelines of our

own lives, going about our daily work, & calls us to lifelong discipleship. Caught up in God's abundant grace, & fed out of that bounty, we are commissioned to go catch others.

Ideas

In the US this past week we observed what is commonly known as Groundhog's Day, supposedly predicting when winter will end. What you & the assembly may not know is that this time of the year was seen by our ancient ancestors as a hinge period between winter & spring. It was honored by blessing & lighting new candles, as the candles that were first lit at the beginning of winter were now spent. The Christian Celts called these days *Imbolc*, meaning "in the womb," identifying that we were in the womb of winter, about to be birthed into spring. Christians took this festival & turned it into one that honored Jesus being named & blessed by Simeon & Anna (officially February 2). Haul out the candles you use in your assembly & publicly bless them today, perhaps as part of the gathering. As Jesus, the light of the world, was blessed by Simeon & Anna, so our candle lights are blessed for this next season as we prepare our hearts for spring & the coming season of Lent.

Theological Reflection

When Peter sees the miracle of the caught fish, he is stunned & suddenly feels unworthy to be in Jesus' presence, knowing that Jesus is holy. What is both beautiful & dangerous about being in the presence of the holy? What is revealed in us when God is revealed to us? Are we ashamed like Peter in the presence of God? Are we energized? A bit of both? Do we even recognize when it takes place? "Affluenza"....In the gospel reading the fishing boats are so full of fish that they begin to sink, a problem caused by abundance. Some of us experience undiagnosed affluenza. Our boats are so full of opportunities, resources, responsibilities, & invitations that we may feel like we are sinking. Abundance can feel burdensome at times. How does Jesus' invitation to follow put abundance into perspective & guide our decisions about what to do with that abundance?

Theological Reflection

Civil rights activist & United States Representative John Lewis was known for telling people to get into "good trouble." He meant that those intending to change systems of oppression & the status quo would need to be willing to risk disrupting things in order to make a statement. In today's gospel Peter & the disciples get into "good trouble"

with a catch of fish that breaks their nets & threatens to sink their boat. Listening to Jesus can put us into risky situations. How is Jesus causing “good trouble” for your congregation these days? How is your congregation being invited to get into “good trouble” in your community, your city, or the world?

Connections with Creation

The image of hard-working, exhausted fishermen toiling all night but catching no fish resonates with the precarious state of today’s oceans, in which overfishing, pollution, & the acidification, coral bleaching, & warming produced by climate change threaten coastal & marine ecosystems & the sources of food upon which billions of people worldwide depend. Wherever we live, let’s thank the ocean for every other breath we take: half the world’s oxygen is produced by phyto-plankton, microscopic organisms in the ocean. But the oceans are dying. How can Christians share in Jesus’ miracle? We can let down our nets into the deep reservoir of our faith & take action. Congregations can organize programs that study ocean health. We can initiate or join local efforts to clean up water- ways & beaches. We can support bans on single-use plastic bags, containers, & bottles, & avoid products containing “microbeads.”

[Luke 5:1-11](#)

Writing in the late 80s for a largely Gentile audience, Luke places the story of the miracle of the fish & the call of the 1st disciples after several healing miracles in Capernaum & Jesus’ move “to the other cities” in Judea (4:43-44). Yet this narrative is located back in the north. Since Jesus’ call to catch people is addressed only to Peter, Luke seems to be using the story to cement Peter’s leadership in the believing community. The catch of fish demonstrates Jesus’ divine power, because like God he can comm& nature. The move from calling Jesus Master (v. 5) to Lord (v. 8), which title carries divine overtones, resembles the post-resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene (in Jn 20) in that it articulates early Christian creed.

We are now the crowd gathered to hear Jesus, the Word of God. We look to Jesus when we are in need. We kneel before Christ to confess our sinfulness. We are called to catch people. Luke’s positive portrayal of the early Christian community is evident in his claim that the disciples “left everything & followed Jesus,” & it supports the proposal that the Jesus’ movement was an itinerant, perhaps unemployed & homeless, group awaiting the eschaton (end of time). What does this mean for us?

The themes in this text around trust, call, discipleship, abundance, discouragement, risk, & persistence are always relevant but have particular resonance during this challenging pandemic time. This text can be heard both as an acknowledgment of a time of emptiness & bleakness, as well as encouragement for discipleship & recognition of Jesus as the source of hope & abundance. After he has finished instruction, Jesus shifts the conversation to focus on Simon & his nets, setting up the act of God. Simon's reply acknowledges the reality of limits & scarcity, but also his willingness to listen & try again. Jesus' mentioning of the "deep water" implies that there may be unexplored areas of potential beyond perceived limits of resources, knowledge, & energy. The response to this willingness is immediate; suddenly they have more fish than two boats can bear.

The act of God here is characterized by abundance & provision. A large catch of fish represents stability & care, support, & having enough. It is a physical manifestation of having one's needs met. If this is where the text would have ended, that provision could have been the focus. It would have celebrated the receipt of daily bread, which is no small thing in that context or in this one. With so many facing food insecurity & a long winter still to come, the image of enough food, of provision & plenty, is compelling. Further, the size of the catch indicates provision beyond the immediate moment. This is food enough to sell so that the fishermen will have resources beyond today. They can eat again tomorrow. &, the food that is sold becomes daily sustenance to others. So, while the large catch of fish conveys provision & plenty for Simon & his partners, it also signals a world beyond these fishermen & their immediate needs. The obvious surplus that can feed many more surpasses instinct or ability for hoarding or secrecy. The community is in view. But our text continues beyond the large catch. Jesus, after providing the gift of plenty & even excess, tells the disciples that they are being called. In some ways, this call is similar to their present work; in others, it is different. The image of fishing is still used, but now it involves people. The climax of the story is the call, not the abundance. In their new role, the disciples will gather the people with the message from & about Jesus. They will follow him while leading & serving others.

[Isaiah 6:1-8 \[9-13\]](#)

Chronicling the life & preaching of Isaiah in the 8th century bce, chps 1–39 of Isaiah threaten the Israelites with divine punishment in the form of political defeat if the people do not return to faithfulness to the covenant. Chapters 6–8 narrate the call of Isaiah himself. King Uzziah died in 742 or 736 bce. God's robe, signifying the cloaking of the divine being, is too large for the temple to contain. Seraphs were winged serpent figures who served God in the heavenly court. The fire from the altar cleanses Isaiah's

lips from unworthiness. His answer “Here I am” is a standard response found in OT call narratives. The call narrative of Isaiah is next to Luke 5 because both Isaiah & Peter experience the power of the Almighty, confess their sinfulness, & are sent to do the work of God. Such a pairing of OT/NT passages exemplifies the similarities throughout the Bible.

Images in the Readings

The NT speaks of some of the Jesus’ followers as having originally been fisherfolk. Perhaps this is a genuine memory of the early decades of the church. But it also builds upon the many biblical references to **fish**. An example of the image of fish used metaphorically is the vision in Ezekiel (47:10) when at the time of God’s great salvation, there will be plenteous fish. That an acronym for the church’s earliest creed—Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Savior—spells the Greek word for fish led to the drawing of a fish being the earliest symbol used by Christians as a sign of their identity. In today’s story, there are more fish than the disciples can handle. In Isaiah’s vision, the Israelite **temple**, with its altar & burning coals, gets merged with the image of God as the sovereign of all things sitting on a **throne** above the skies. In antiquity, many polytheisms imagined the gods as reigning from an upper level of the universe. Even in our time, many hymns retain the imagery of God’s throne room as above all created things. Most artistic images of angels are not biblically informed. The word for **seraphim**, the same as that describing the fiery serpents that bit the Israelites, designates a mythical monster closer to a dragon than to winged women clothed in white, who resemble fairies. Cherubim, as far from toddler angels as possible, were griffins, that is, winged lions that flanked a monarch’s throne as symbols of power & protection. Would such imagery be helpful in our time, or not?

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