

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 10, 2019
Church of the Holy Cross
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Luke 5:1-11
Isaiah 6:1-13
1 Corinthians 15:1-11

You Will Be Catching People

From now on you will be catching people. Now, I was very excited to preach when I first saw our readings for this week: the calling of Jesus' first disciples, the call of the prophet Isaiah, and Paul's summary of the Gospel message to the Corinthians! I thought, "Here it is! This is my chance to preach on evangelism! My chance to preach on how Jesus calls us to share the Good News with others!" I was *so* excited to preach. Or at least I was until I started digging deeper into these readings.

From now on you will be catching—you will be fishing for—people. By a quick show of hands, how many of you have ever gone fishing? [Show of hands] Now tell me this, what happens to a fish when it gets caught? [Responses] Fishing usually doesn't end well for the fish.

See, I had always thought that Jesus' call to his disciples meant that they were supposed to go out and catch outsiders and bring them into the Church.

But Jesus' call to his first disciples takes on a new meaning when we read it against the backdrop of the Old Testament prophets and *their* use of fishing imagery.¹ For example, Jeremiah—whose call narrative we heard last Sunday—uses fishing imagery to articulate God's judgment against Israel.

I am now sending for many fishermen, says the Lord, and they shall catch them; and afterward I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them... And I will doubly repay their iniquity and their sin, because they have polluted my land with the carcasses of their detestable idols, and have filled my inheritance with their abominations. (Jer. 16:16, 18)

The fishermen that God sends out are agents of divine judgment against idolatry and injustice. They are summoned to reel in the people of Israel so that God can settle his score with them.

And we hear the same thing from the prophet Amos in his condemnation of the wealthy women of Samaria:

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on Mount Samaria, who oppress the poor... The Lord God has sworn by his holiness: The time is surely coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks. (Amos 4:1-2)

¹ The following survey of the prophetic material is based on material from Richard B. Hays' *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*.

In bidding the disciples to become fishers of people, Jesus is calling them to participate in that prophetic tradition of proclaiming God's imminent judgment. Theirs is a net of divine indictment. To be caught in this net seems a thing most terrible.

Now, of course, proclaiming God's imminent judgment won't make them very popular. This is why, in Mark's gospel, Jesus tells his disciples to shake the dust off their feet against anyone who rejects their message (Mk. 6:10-12). For many, the Good News will sound like bad news!

It certainly sounded like bad news to Isaiah in our Old Testament reading this morning. Or at least it would have if we had read Isaiah's whole call narrative.

For reasons that will become clear in a moment, our lectionary permits us to drop off half of this narrative. So, we hear about the seraphs, the angelic song, and the purification with the burning coal, but we cut it off after "Here I am, send me." But, if we kept reading, this is what God would tell Isaiah to say:

"Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.' Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed."

Then I said, "How long, O Lord?"

And he said: "Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; until the Lord sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land. Even 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. (Jer. 6:9-13)

I think our lectionary permits us to drop this half of Isaiah's call narrative because it sounds like really bad news. Even Isaiah asks, "How long, O lord?" "How long do I have to preach that?" And, in so many words, God responds, "Until the tree is burned down to its stump."

But here's the thing: if we don't hear the second half of Isaiah's call narrative—if we don't engage what sounds like bad news—then we rob ourselves of the actual Good News. Isaiah's call doesn't end with a lifeless stump; it ends with a holy seed. And in the very same way, the call of Jesus' first disciples doesn't end with a net full of dead fish; it ends with new life.

This is what St. Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians. Like many in our own time, some in the church at Corinth denied the bodily resurrection of Jesus. They had not fully received the tradition and falsely thought the Gospel ended in death. To begin correcting this pseudo-Gospel, Paul quotes one of the earliest Christian creeds:

[T]hat Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. (1 Cor. 15:3-5)

This creed is a summary of the Gospel—the net in which the disciples will be catching people. But, to our ears, it doesn't really sound like a net of divine indictment. It doesn't seem to have the same bite that Isaiah's message of judgment had.

But I think we hear it this way because—like Isaiah's call narrative—we have only allowed ourselves to hear half of it.

What I mean is this: the resurrection is Good News in itself, but it is really bad news for the powers that killed Jesus! If God raised Jesus from the dead, then that means all the powers that conspired to kill him—the powers of empire, violence, and death—are all on the wrong side of cosmic history! God's vindication of Jesus in raising him from the dead is the condemnation of the forces that put him to death!

And make no mistake, those forces are just as active today as they were at our Lord's murder. Our world is founded on the very same powers of war and wealth that the Roman world was founded upon. The Gospel—the net that catches Rome—catches Washington just as easily.

Those with a vested interest in Jesus staying dead will always reactively dull their minds, stop their ears, and shut their eyes to God's message of judgment. But in doing so, they fail to recognize the actual Good News within it!

Yes, the cross—the tree upon which Jesus was crucified—burns down the tree of idolatry and injustice to the stump. But the cross is also the holy seed within that stump.

It is upon the cross that God finally settles the score. Having made an account of all iniquity and sin, God repays with double forgiveness. In fact, so vast is the pardon of God that dull minds, stopped ears, and shut eyes, are sharpened, cleared, and opened, in the face of this divine amnesty.

But this can only happen when the idolatrous forces of empire, violence, and death are caught up in the nets of the Gospel. And for that to happen, God needs some fishermen—some evangelists.

Now, this will end as a sermon on evangelism, but in a very different way than I first intended.

I am convinced that there are two primary reasons why The Episcopal Church doesn't evangelize in the traditional sense.

First, I think we know the world will reject our message. Like the apostles, we know that the Gospel won't make us popular. People don't want to hear about how our world order is under the imminent judgment of the crucified God. That kind of thing might stir up trouble at the country club or the PTA. So, instead we abuse the words of St. Francis and say, "Preach the gospel at all times, if necessary use words."

Second, I think we don't evangelize in the traditional sense because we know we are caught up in the very forces that the Gospel brings under judgment. Whether it's our profession, our stock portfolio, or the things we buy just to maintain a comfortable lifestyle, we are in some degree accessories to the idolatry and injustices of our world. Like Isaiah, we acknowledge, "I am a person of unclean lips among a people of unclean lips." And, contaminated by our culture, we remain silent.

My brother and sisters in Christ, we will indeed be rejected. Our lips are indeed unclean. But the one who bids us to follow him will not reject us. And the one who sends us out will purify our lips.

Whether we know it or not, that is why we come here each week. Our Lord is made present to us upon this altar and the bread and the chalice become a burning coal unto our lips. Everything we do here is meant to empower us to go out and proclaim the Good News—to go out and go fishing.

What remains is to take a careful inventory. Have we actually left the boats behind? Have we accepted our call to speak the truth to our world? Have we come to believe and proclaim the tradition we have received?