

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany—Year C

Isaiah 6:1-8, [9-13]

Psalm 138

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Luke 5:1-11

All of these *juxtapositions* today! Crazy awe-inspiring **holiness** in **Isaiah**, a **vision of God Godself**, coupled with the prophet's experience of **"Whoa, I'm not worthy. I'm a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"** And with the **touch of a burning coal**, **Isaiah's guilt departs and his sin is blotted out—unclean no more.** Great! *Then*, comes the ask from God, **"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"** Newly cleansed **Isaiah** finds his voice, **"Here am I; send me!"**

But listen to what **God** wants **Isaiah** to proclaim: **"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."**

"Huh? You want me to dull their mind and stop their ears and shut their eyes so that they can't see or listen or comprehend or turn and be healed? What kind of a God are you? Oh, sorry God, that was one of those inside thoughts—that one wasn't supposed to get out. Uh, okay, how long, O Lord, how long do I get to proclaim this 'good news'?"

"Oh, until the cities lay waste and there's no people in the houses and the land is utterly desolate and there's a vast emptiness in the midst of the land and all that's left is a stump," replied **God**.

Think **Isaiah** is *rethinking* that **"Here I am, send me"** exuberant offering he made about 4 verses ago?

And then there is this weird little piece of **text**—it's not *within* what **God's** saying, but it's just there in the **final verse of chapter 6**, and it says this: **"The holy seed is its stump."**

It's frankly a lot of weird imagery that **Isaiah** throws at us, from a **smoke-filled vision of God** to a **daggone desolate picture of everything to a holy seed in a stump.**

But let's go a little *deeper*. There was no question, but **Isaiah had lost his way**. It was a **live coal that gave Isaiah a new beginning**. And there is no question that **the people of God have lost their way. Too much dependence on their own power—too much dependence** on what **they think** and what **they hear** and what **they see. Too much turning yearning for healing without the deep spade work needed to transform the soul.**

No, *sometimes*, it's not until we get to the **desolate and empty place, not until we are gazing upon the stump that seems all but dead**, not until we are at *that ground zero* that **the seed God has planted can find the space to grow. Sometimes, we can't actually find God until** we get to that kind of *surrender* because, up until that point, **a lot of us are still trying to run the show.**

When **everything we've constructed gets chopped down**, *maybe then* we are ready to see **what God can do with a holy seed in a stump**.

This isn't happy clappy good news, but if you are, in fact, inhabiting a space in your life that feels utterly desolate and a vast emptiness, if you are experiencing how the oaks you believed in have been cut down to stumps, then this is actually very good news. In the midst of all that desolation, there IS a holy seed that can grow.

We get a similarly weird *juxtaposition* in Luke. Here, Jesus has borrowed Simon Peter's fishing boat to put out a little ways from the shore to teach the crowds. *After the teaching part*, Jesus tells Peter to put out into *the deep water* and put down the nets for a catch. Peter protests just a bit, "Master, we've been fishing all night and caught nothing, nada, zilch, but if you say so, I'll let 'em down." When they did this, they caught so many fish that their nets were breaking.

And Peter's response to this awe-inspiring experience? Very similar to Isaiah's—"Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man; I am a missing-the-mark kinda guy!" But Jesus reassures Peter, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they *left everything and followed him*.

It's interesting, Peter, James, John, they'd been working all night, but, as one commentator noted, *their night fishing tended to concentrate on the shallow waters*. Jesus calls Peter to put out into *the deep*, and it's *in the deep waters* that the *catch* is overflowing abundant.

And that bit about *catching people* is an interesting image because **this kind of catching** is about *ensnaring*—remember, *the fish don't really want to be caught, but they are caught unawares and caught up in the net*. Isn't that how it goes with us? Truth be told, we are both the fisher and the fished.

Sometimes, we join Peter as an extension of Jesus and put our nets out into the *deep waters* and haul people in reminding them that they are beloved of God no matter what.

And *sometimes*, we are the ones caught unawares, *most often through an encounter with one of God's agents in our fellow humanity*, and we are brought face-to-face with the fierce love of God that is deeper than our shame and stronger than our fear, *ensnared and captured* by a Love that makes us want to leave everything and follow.

And **this catching** and *being caught*, it *always* involves **risking the deep water**. *And who of us likes to go there where you can't see, and you can't hear, and it's hard to comprehend what's happening?* But **that's where the catch happens, and that is often where we are caught**.

What shallow waters are causing you to toil but are still leaving you empty-handed? What are the deep waters calling to you? Where is Jesus calling you to let down your net and see what might come forth? Where is there a net trying to catch you that you've been eluding? Can you allow yourself to be caught by this Love? What might you have to leave behind if you get ensnared in an encounter with such overflowing grace and abundance?

New **life**, new **possibility**, **transformative hope**, a **holy seed**, an **overflowing catch**, **all from a stump**, **all from the deep waters**.

Juxtapositions, contradictions, paradox.

In the end, whether it's **desolation OR abundance**, a **vast emptiness OR a teeming deep**, *one way or the other*, **God is at work**, **actively at work**, **painstakingly**, **fiercely at work**, to **call forth life and possibility from the places where everyone else has given up**. Amen.

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