

**Sunday, February 6, 2022**  
**Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany (Year C)**

Isaiah 6.1-8; Luke 5.1-11

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregorystlongbeach/videos/976186319676307>

*(Sermon begins at about 16:45)*

**“Whom Shall I Send?”**

All of our readings today deal with the subject of “call.” Of being called to ministry. Quite appropriate for the day on which we are holding our annual parish meeting. Quite appropriate for the day on which we celebrate the ministries—and more importantly, the ministers—of this parish. And when I say ministers of this parish, I am not talking about myself. As the Catechism in *The Book of Common Prayer* asks, “Who are the ministers of the Church?” Answer? “The ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons” (BCP, 855). Notice that you—the laity—are listed first. Because you are the most important ministers of the Church. The Catechism then goes on: “What is the ministry of the laity?” Answer? “The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church” (BCP, 855).

This answer, this understanding of the ministry of the laity, has three essential parts. The first part: to represent Christ and his Church. What you do in your daily lives and ministries. The third part: to participate in the life, worship, and governance of the Church. What we are doing through this worship service and what we will do through our annual meeting. And the second part, linking the first and third, is the key to how all of this is accomplished. As the Catechism puts it: “according to the gifts given them.” This is the key, the essential part. The gifts given you are what allows ministry to happen. That is what we celebrate in our annual meeting. And that is what our readings for today touch upon, particularly our readings from Isaiah and Luke. Each giving some insight into that which makes us uniquely qualified for ministry in the Lord’s name.

Our first reading from the Prophet Isaiah is the story of God calling Isaiah into service. This is a classic call narrative. Perhaps the quintessential call narrative. So much so that it is one of the choices for the Old Testament reading at the ordination of priests. A favorite because of the call and response at the end of the passage: “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’” (Is 6.8). A call and response that is not solely that of clergy, but of all whom God calls to his service. Clergy and laity alike. That God does not compel us into service, but rather invites us. And that we have a choice in how we respond.

In this reading, Isaiah laments: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and live among a people of unclean lips” (Is 6.5). Is he trying to make excuses to get out of service to God, or is he concerned about his worthiness to engage in the sacred work God is inviting him into? Maybe a little of both. But God, as always, has a response, a solution. “Then one of the

seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out'" (Is 6.6-7). In that act, Isaiah is purified for his service to the Lord. This act is very similar to other encounters between the Divine and the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, which are not so much acts of purification, but acts of giving these prophets the gifts they needed for the ministry God was calling them to. And so it is with us. God sees the skills and talents we possess and calls us into his service precisely because he has need of those skills and talents. And if we don't have what is needed? God gives us those gifts to fulfill the purposes to which he is calling us. "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" "Here am I; send me!"

In our reading from the Gospel according to Luke, Jesus begins to call his disciples into service. Beginning with Simon Peter, as well as James and John. Up to this point, Jesus has already been at work, traveling through the Galilean countryside, preaching, teaching, and healing. But he has reached a point where he needs some help if he is going to reach all the people he wants to, to do all the sorts of ministry he wants to accomplish. Time to bring on some disciples. In this call narrative, we glean a few more things about what it means to be called into service to our Lord.

Jesus is waiting for Simon Peter on the shore of the Lake of Gennesaret, also known as the Sea of Galilee, as Peter and his crew return after a long night of fishing. A night in which they have caught absolutely nothing. Jesus gets in the boat and tells Peter "'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.'" Simon answered, 'Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets'" (Lk 5.4-5). We are told that they caught so many fish that the nets were breaking, that they needed to get another boat to help them with all the fish. This scene tells us a couple of things. That in our ministries, no matter how difficult they may be, no matter how improbably they might seem, when God calls us, we can trust that there is a reason. Even if we can't always see what that might be. Peter undoubtedly had encounters with Jesus before. Probably heard him preach in the synagogue at Capernaum. So, he had a good idea what Jesus was about. And therefore, was willing to trust him in his most recent, most audacious request to put out into the deep waters. Despite having spent all night out there and having nothing to show for it. But if Jesus was making the request, there must be something to it. And so it is with us. We can fall back on what we know of Jesus through Scripture, through tradition, through our own experiences. That he knows what he is talking about, even if it sounds difficult or improbable or crazy.

Peter has an interesting response when Jesus demonstrates through the abundance of fish—which we eventually see as a metaphor for the work of evangelism that Jesus is calling Peter into—that Peter is the man for the job. That Peter is who Jesus needs for this job. Yet, Peter falls down in front of Jesus and says, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" (Lk 5.8). Reminiscent of our friend Isaiah. This says something about Peter's sense of his own self-worth. There is the strong sense that Peter does not have faith. Not that he doesn't have faith in Jesus. That had already been proven when he complied with Jesus' request to set out into deep waters. No, here Peter is expressing lack of faith in himself. Perhaps he does not feel like he has what it takes to do what Jesus is asking of him. Perhaps he does not feel that he is worthy to be a disciple of one such as Jesus. But Jesus will have none of that. He responds, "Do not be afraid;

from now on you will be catching people” (Lk 5.10b). In other words, “Knock it off, Peter. You may not have faith in yourself, you may not feel like you have what it takes, but I know. I know that you are exactly who I need for this job. Now get up and let’s get to work. Let’s go catch some people. Let’s go spread the Gospel.”

The third lesson from this scene is related to the first two. Having to do with the results of following Jesus’ requests. In the Gospel account, when Peter complies, they do indeed catch some fish. A great abundance. Far beyond anything they could have hoped for or imagined. A demonstration that, if we have faith, we will be successful. Jesus did not call Peter to fail. Nor does he call us to fail. He calls us to success. Now, admittedly, it may not always be easy to see success in some of what we do. It may not always be success in the way we would like, in the way that we would define it. But we can always find something successful in those endeavors in which we faithfully follow Jesus’ call. “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” “Here am I; send me!”

Our readings for today boil down to these three truths about ministry. First, that when God calls us into his service, it is because he believes in us. If God believes in us, we should believe in ourselves, as well. Second, the work God calls us to may seem impractical, impossible, even crazy. And will likely entail a lot of perseverance and hard work. But we have what it takes. Otherwise, God wouldn’t have called us. And if we don’t have what it takes, God will provide it. And third, God always calls us toward abundance in the midst of apparent scarcity. That God does not call us to fail, but only to succeed.

We’ve learned something of these lessons over the last couple of years. When the pandemic has made doing ministry, has made responding to God’s call, just that much more difficult. But throughout, God has been faithful to us, as we have sought to be faithful to him. Sure, there have been times when we might have doubted. Doubted our own abilities or the sanity of what we were called to do. But we have demonstrated time and again that we indeed have what it takes. And we have been successful in keeping our ministries going and even in expanding some of our ministries. We have certainly been successful in expanding the reach of our parish community. If we can do that in a time of pandemic, just think what we can accomplish as life starts to move back toward a little more sense of normalcy, toward a little less insanity. Particularly if we keep the lessons from today’s readings before us as our guiding principles for all our parish ministries.

“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” “Here are we; send us!”