

**Sunday, February 9, 2025**  
**Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany (Year C)**  
Isaiah 6.1-8; 1 Corinthians 15.1-11; Luke 5.1-11

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/968664441460202>

*(Sermon begins at about 23:10)*

### **“Being Called”**

Thus far in our Epiphanytide journey, we have been exploring the various forms Epiphany takes. The word “epiphany” meaning manifestation or revelation. For us, in this context, Epiphany being the various ways in which Jesus is revealed as Messiah to and for all people. So far, those various epiphanies have been in more public contexts: the coming of the Magi, Jesus’ baptism by John in the Jordan River, the changing of water into wine at the wedding at Cana, and Jesus beginning his public ministry with a sermon at the synagogue in Nazareth. All these events making a public proclamation in some form or fashion, while also revealing qualities and attributes of who Jesus is and of the nature of his ministry.

But in today’s Gospel, we have a revelation, an epiphany, of a more personal nature. Further revelation of who Jesus is through an encounter with an individual. Revelation of how Jesus operates through individuals. All packaged in an invitation to join him in ministry. What we commonly refer to as “being called.” The Gospel, and actually all the scripture readings we heard today, being what we commonly refer to as “call narratives.” Examination of these call narratives revealing something about who Jesus is—or in the case of the Old Testament reading, about who God is—and collectively, about how God and Christ are revealed and operate in the world. How God and Christ operate in the lives of those invited into service of the Kingdom.

Our Gospel reading starts with a very public sign and moves to a more private encounter. Preparing to preach to a large crowd beside the lake of Gennesaret, also known as the Sea of Galilee, Jesus realizes he could better address the crowd from out on the lake. Sort of a natural amphitheater, with Jesus down on the lake level, and the crowds seated on the land rising from the shore. So, he gets Peter to take him out in his boat. Picking Peter was likely not a random choice, given what follows. And Peter and Jesus were not strangers to one another. At some point previously, Jesus had spent time in Peter’s home, where he healed Peter’s mother-in-law.

After he is done preaching to the crowd, Jesus commands Peter, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Actually, a pretty strange request. And yet, perhaps necessary for the catch that Jesus intended to make. And I’m not referring to the massive haul of fish. The reason this is a strange request is that it was made during daylight. Much of the fishing on the Sea of Galilee is done at night, when the fish are more active. Peter protests: “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing.” Implying that if they were unable to catch anything at night, they certainly were not going to catch anything during the day. But, catch fish they did. And lots of it. “So many fish that their nets were beginning to break.”

Now, catching the fish was not the real point. Jesus' real goal was to catch Peter. Peter referred to Jesus as "Master," indicating he already held him in high esteem, as a teacher and as a healer. But at this point, Peter was not yet a disciple. In fact, he probably hadn't even considered the possibility. This miraculous catch was meant as a sign to Peter as to Jesus' true capabilities. Meant to seal the deal. And perhaps to serve as a metaphor Jesus could use to convince Peter to become a disciple.

Peter is awestruck at the miraculous catch, recognizing this could only be because Jesus is obviously more powerful than Peter had initially thought. Perhaps, more divine? Or at least divinely empowered. Recognizing this, Peter "fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!'" He does not feel worthy to even be in Jesus' presence. Although, perhaps there are other things holding him back, as well. Perhaps he realizes what Jesus is trying to do, to get him to follow him. Perhaps he lacks faith. Not in Jesus, but in himself. Thinking, "I'm just a fisherman. What could I possibly bring to the table?" Perhaps it is Peter's humility, this recognition of his own sinfulness and fallibility, his own limitations, that Jesus is looking for. Not someone who is out for his own glory, but one who would be more likely to be a team player in the service of others. Jesus uses the whole fish-catching miracle as a metaphor for what he really wants. Of the real intended catch. "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people."

This statement is more than a convenient metaphor, but is intentional. Not just playing on what had happened with the catching of fish, but rather a co-opting of a common image of the day. In various Old Testament prophets, such as Jeremiah, Amos, and Habakkuk, "fishing for people" was used as an image for God catching sinners, as if by a hook or a net, for purposes of divine judgment. In Peter expressing his own sinfulness, Jesus is using this common and ancient image, turning it upside down. For Jesus, catching people is no longer an image of divine wrath and punishment, but from now on an image of providing sinners with the opportunity for forgiveness and experiencing God's grace and mercy. If he accepts the invitation, Peter would be helping to bring people not to condemnation but to salvation.

Peter gets the message. He accepts the invitation. And so do his fellow fishermen who witness the scene: James and John. "When they had brought their boats to the shore, they left everything and followed him." They were all in.

Today's reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians contains a reference to Paul's own experience of being called by Christ: "as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain." Allusion to the fact that, prior to having his encounter with the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul had been under orders from the Temple authorities to root out and persecute the followers of Jesus. A job which he did with great delight and quite effectively. And yet, despite this, despite actions and an attitude which for anyone else would have been disqualifying to say the least, Christ called Paul into his service. Recognizing that he could use the fervent zeal that Paul possessed not to persecute the Church, but to expand it. Through the whole experience, entailing a period of blindness, Paul came to see things differently. He was therefore willing to

turn his beliefs and his life completely around to follow the One whom he had been persecuting. To become one of the people he had been persecuting. To the point that this devout Pharisaic Jew became a missionary and apostle to the Gentiles. Greatly expanding the reach of Christianity and significantly altering the understanding of what it means to be Christian.

Today's Old Testament reading from the Prophet Isaiah is a classic call narrative. This is one of, if not the most popular, Old Testament readings at services of ordination to the priesthood. In this reading we hear of Isaiah's own encounter with God in the temple, likely the Holy of Holies, which was thought to be God's home. Indicating that Isaiah was already a priest or some high-ranking religious authority. Before God's intentions are even expressed, before God's invitation is even issued, Isaiah expresses his own unworthiness to be in the presence of God: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am 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." As if knowing what God is seeking, Isaiah recognizes his unworthiness to serve as God's messenger. In response, a seraph touches a live coal to Isaiah's mouth. A sacramental act of purification, an act of commissioning, signaling that nonetheless, God recognizes that Isaiah has gifts that God can use.

We then hear the voice of God issue his invitation: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" To which Isaiah responds, "Here am I; send me!" His recognition that if God is inviting him, it does not matter what Isaiah thinks of himself. That God would not invite Isaiah if he was not just who God needed in the moment. If he did not have what God needed at that time. His words of acceptance echoing the response to the calls of other prophets before him. Of Moses being called by God from the Burning Bush. Moses, who was fleeing Egypt after murdering an Egyptian. Moses, who had a speech impediment. And yet, the one God calls to be his messenger, to lead his people to liberation and to the Promised Land. Isaiah's words also echoing the response of Samuel when God came to him as he slept in the place where the ark of God was kept. Samuel, a young boy who was not even initially able to recognize God's call. And yet, Samuel, at the prompting of the priest Eli, was willing to say "Here I am." Likely unaware to what he was even committing to. Yet, one who grew to be a great prophet, guiding the people from the time of the judges to the formation of the United Monarchy of Israel under Saul and again under David. Being instrumental in transforming their understanding of who they were as a people and of their relationship with God.

In all these call narratives, we see a common theme. Every one—Peter, Paul, Isaiah, Moses, Samuel, and so many more before and after—being reluctant to accept the invitation. "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" "I am . . . unfit to be called an apostle." "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips." Feeling they were sinful and not worthy of service to God. Feeling the task put before them seemed impossible. Feeling that they were inept, not having what was needed for the work. In some cases, probably being uncertain, if not downright scared, about what was being asked of them. In some, if not all cases, likely being unsure if they were willing to give up the lives they had known to follow God into the unknown.

And yet, despite how they viewed themselves, despite their shortcomings, despite their failings, God saw something in each one that he needed for his Kingdom. God called them despite who

they were. Nay, God called them precisely because of who they were. And in every case, they proved to be just who God needed, just who the Church needed, at that particular time.

We don't just tell these call narratives for the sake of telling the stories. Wonderful stories though they are. We continue to remember and celebrate these stories because they serve as an example to us. They serve as a reminder to us that as God's people, we are all called by God to play our part in the building of his Kingdom. No matter who we are. We may think we are nobodies. We may think that we are not worthy, that we are not good enough, that we are not pure enough. We may think we do not have anything to offer. Well, you know what? Every one of those invited in today's call narratives were, in their own way, nobodies. Common everyday folks just living their lives, doing their jobs, until God invited them to something more. Every one of those invited in today's call narratives felt like they were not worthy or good enough, that they were too sinful. Every one felt that they didn't have anything to offer. Yet, God saw beyond their ordinariness. God saw beyond their flaws and imperfections. God saw something in each of them that he needed at that particular moment. And God invited each of them into a new way of life in his service. Thanks be to God they trusted and said "yes" to God's invitation.

Each and every one of us is of value to God. Each and every one of us has something to offer. Each and every one of us has something that God needs here and now. I would venture that God is already inviting you, calling you into his service. It's just a matter of being open to hearing his invitation, to hearing his call. And then, to trust in him and to be willing to respond, "Here am I; send me!"