

“Into the Deep Water”

Luke 5:1-11; I Corinthians 15:1-11; Isaiah 6:1-8

Isaiah 6:1-8

⁶In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple.

²Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

⁵And I said: “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!”

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 and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.”

⁸Then 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!”

Luke 5:1-11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, ²he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets.

³He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore.

Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.

⁴When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and 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 and help them. And they came and 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 he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; ¹⁰and so also were James and 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 people.”

¹¹When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

I Corinthians 15:1-10

¹Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, ²through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you— unless you have come to believe in vain.

³For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,
⁴and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day [...].

⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters [...].

⁷Then he appeared to James,
 then to all the apostles.

⁸Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

⁹For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain.”

Prayer

God of Heaven and Earth,
 Savior, Lord; Spirit within and around us,

Let us be your messengers in this world.

We, though a people of unclean lips,
 are ready to volunteer to go where you send us.

Amazed by what happens when we follow your direction,
 we, with our inner imposter syndromeⁱ constantly telling us
 how unworthy we are,
 fall down at your knees,
 declaring our unworthiness of your company;
 but when we hear you telling us we don't have to be afraid,
 we're ready to follow wherever you go.

Because each of us knows—
 in whatever shards of privacy are left in this world—
 what we have done that in our own view makes us unfit

to be called an apostle,
 we can only put our hope in your grace
 to make us whatever we are,
 trusting that it will not have been in vain.

But enough human theology, O God;
 enough with the attempts at eloquence.
 Words get in the way of the unity with you that we long for.

I want to hear and feel your message within me—
 whether in a new way or an old way, whatever is *your* way,
 but *deeply* and *truly* and *powerfully* and *physically*.

And then let me be your messenger.
 Let me live for that breathtaking good news.
 Let it radiate so truthfully in everything I do or say
 that everyone (including me) will know
 that I am carrying a message to share with the world
 that doesn't belong to me
 but for which I would do anything—
 call strangers neighbors, love my enemies,
 feed more people than I think I can
 and let you lead me to deeper places
 than I am comfortable going.

Lord Jesus, we are persons of unclean lips
 in a time of unclean lips,
 among peoples of unclean lips,
 with leaders of unclean lips,
 and airways full of unclean lips,

but knowing that you, by the power at work within us,
 can accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,ⁱⁱ

we keep looking and listening for

the gracious and thundering celebratory angel voices,
 sniffing the air for holy smoke,
 wanting to see a glimpse of awesome majesty
 mighty enough so that we will not be afraid
 to proclaim your good news consequentially and with purpose,
 in every way and in every place
 and with abundant and generous and consequential love
 for every person on earth.

Here am I—made clean by you.

Let the world be your temple and the temple be the world,

and send me out, if you will,

with my lips cleansed

and my guilt departed

and my sin blotted out

by your astoundingly merciful grace—

the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle,

a baffled fisher faithfully putting out into deeper waters,

grateful for the invitation to go to the source of abundant life

and bring back enough to share with the whole world.

Amen.

The Sermon

In 2014 Julie Schumacher published a mostly humorous novel called *Dear Committee Members* which is set in a fictional, small Midwestern university—specifically the English Department, which is facing declining enrollment and severe budget cuts while upstairs from the English Department, the Economics Department is being lavished with financial contributions and offices renovations.

It's narrated in the voice of a beleaguered professor of creative writing and literature named Jason Fitger, although he's not really "narrating." The whole novel is presented as a series of nearly 70 letters of recommendation written by Professor Fitger on behalf of students and colleagues who have asked for his help in getting scholarships or jobs or committee assignments.

Professor Fitger's letters are as jaded and acerbic as he is, but about halfway through the book, we get a glimpse into what's going on inside the professor as he digresses in a letter that he's writing to a teaching colleague. He writes to his old friend:

"I'm always taken aback when students confide in me that beneath their desire to write lies a quest for permanence.

"It's odd, but touching, I think, that even during this disposable age, while consigning great mountains of refuse to landfills and to atolls of plastic in the Pacific, these young would-be novelists and poets believe that art is eternal.

"Au contraire! We are in the business of ephemera, the era of floating islands of trash, and most of the things we feel deeply and inscribe on the page will disappear."

And the aging professor of literature and creative writing says to his colleague, "...I fear we are the last remaining members of a dying profession...The stately academic career featuring black-robed professors striding confidently across the campus square is already fading,

and though I've often railed against its eccentricities,
I want to proclaim here
that I believe our mission and our way of life
to have been admirable and lovely,
steeped with purpose and worth defending.

But we are nearly at the tipping point, I suspect, and will soon be a thing of the past.”ⁱⁱⁱ

I was startled when I came across those last lines because throughout my lifetime, before and including the time I’ve been in professional church ministry, I’ve either heard practically those same words, or I’ve seen them reflected in the affect and the lives of so many faithful people at one time or another, myself included—and not just professional clergy but all kinds of people, with or without a personal investment in the Church.

*I fear we are the last remaining members of a dying profession...^{iv}
and though I’ve often railed against its eccentricities,
I believe our mission and our way of life
to have been admirable and lovely,
steeped with purpose and worth defending.
But we are nearly at the tipping point, I suspect,
and will soon be a thing of the past.^v*

With the crowd pressing in on him, Jesus had gotten into Simon’s boat, and had asked Simon to put out a little way from the shore; and he sat down—as a rabbi does when it’s time to preach—and taught the crowds from the boat.

And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”

And Simon said, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing.” They were fishing people, who lived, and almost certainly had grown up in, a fishing community, a fishing economy, a fishing environment. They had been at it a long time and they knew their business. And they had just worked the night shift, all night long, and still managed to stay awake as Jesus taught the crowds, so while to the rest of the world it was a bright and sunny morning, to Simon and the

other fishers, the morning light was just the continuation of a long and fruitless night.

Which, in a way, could be seen as a microcosm of where Simon's people were at this point in their history: a dominated people in an occupied land, memories of greatness and independence long since faded into history.

It could also be something of a microcosm of people who, let's say, lived in a country where everything we thought we could rely on in terms of our institutions, in terms of our government, in terms of the way people regard one another and treat one another—where everything feels like it's breaking down, and we miss even some of our old certainties that we didn't even like before, but at least we had a sense of who we were and what everything was about and what our future was likely to hold.

Sometimes it just feels like the world we live in is like a kid's loose tooth; it's still kind of in there where it always has been, but it keeps getting more and more wiggly and we're past the point where we can just say, well, just leave it alone; maybe it'll firm up again.

So, whether people are feeling unsettled by a sense of loss in a stagnant world, or a sense of uncertainty in a world that feels like it's changing all around them—and not for the better,

when a piece of good news reaches you and resonates deep within you, you're willing to go a long way to embrace that news and make it part of your life.

Something in what Jesus had said as he taught the crowds had struck some kind of chord with Simon,

so even though the fishing crews had been out all night and had caught nothing, when Jesus said, “put out into the deep water, and let down

your nets for a catch,” Simon said, “That doesn’t sound like what my dispiriting experience would indicate, but if you say so, I’ll let down the nets.”

Is God inviting you to go deeper?

Is God challenging you to move out of a certain shallowness in the way you look at your life, or the world, or the people in the world who didn’t catch the lucky breaks that you did, including where and when and to whom and under what circumstances you were born, through no goodness or wisdom whatsoever on your part?

Or, perhaps, is God inviting you to move out into deeper waters, where your relationship with God has to rely on more trust than you’ve had to have before, or where easy certainties of set dogma give way to deep, hidden mysteries of God’s untamable love?

They put out to the deeper water, and let down their nets, and this time, they caught so many fish their nets were starting to break. They signaled the other boat to come and help, and they filled that boat, too.

And Simon saw the physical manifestation of all that goodness, all of that abundance, the joining of the Kingdom of Heaven and the physical realities of the Earth,

and he fell down at Jesus’ knees, and said, “Go away from me, Lord; for I am a sinful man!”

D.H. Lawrence said, “The world fears a new experience more than anything. Because a new experience displaces so many old experiences.”^{vi}

And, as Richard Rohr says, a true inner experience “changes us, and human beings do not like to change.”^{vii}

But maybe it wasn't that Simon Peter didn't want to change. Maybe he thought he *couldn't*, and so it may have seemed obvious to him that he would always be unacceptable.^{viii}

Maybe he thought it was too late for God to bring about a change in him, or maybe he even thought it was too late for God to make a difference in the world.

Maybe we're all, secretly, somewhere deep inside, afraid of that now: that we've made too much of a mess of things, that it's beyond salvaging, that the problems of the world are now so tangled and so intransigent that God either couldn't possibly lead us to overcome them, or couldn't possibly want to.

And Jesus said, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people."

And having been invited to go out to the deeper water;
and having found there phenomenal abundance
that they had not been able to access
before they heard what Jesus said;
and having loaded their boats almost to the point of sinking,
knowing many people would be fed abundantly
on this awesome haul;
and having heard the voice of God tell them that this promise,
and this abundance, and this grace, and this beauty,
and this astonishing reality manifested in real life, here and now,
and this love, the love of God for all humanity and all the world,
was to be shared with creation
by human disciples just like and including them,

they brought their boats to shore, and left everything they had thought was the sum total of what their lives could be, and followed him.

“Who’s to say the effort to be real isn’t the beginning of wings?” asked the poet and spiritual writer Mark Nepo.^{ix}

“Who’s to say that the budding of wings from the ribs of small birds doesn’t begin with the impulse within them to live?

“Who’s to say that the butterfly breaking through its cocoon isn’t the result of its being tired of living in a tight weave of its own making?

“Who’s to say that the migration of flamingoes from South America to Africa doesn’t begin with a yearning to eat the yellow ribbon that keeps lining the horizon?

“And who’s to say the color of passion doesn’t line our faces the instant we grow tired of living in a tight cocoon of *our* own making?

“Who’s to say the journey to love doesn’t begin the instant we give voice to that loneliness that no one wants to hear?

“Who’s to say the journey to peace doesn’t sprout like a small wing the instant we let our feelings find their place in the world? In truth,” he said, “every effort that is allowed its full beat within will ripple as a birth of some kind in the world.”^x

By the grace of God I am what I am,
 and God’s grace toward me has not been in vain.
 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!”

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ⁱ Abigail Adams, “Yes, Impostor Syndrome Is Real. Here’s How to Deal With It.” Time.com, June 20, 2018 (<http://time.com/5312483/how-to-deal-with-impostor-syndrome/>)

ⁱⁱ Ephesians 3:20

ⁱⁱⁱ Julie Schumacher, *Dear Committee Members* (Random House Audio, 2014), Chapter 40

^{iv} The formal term for how one initially joins a Christian church is by “profession of faith.”

^v Schumacher, *Dear Committee Members*, Ch. 40

^{vi} D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in American Literature* (New York: Seltzer, 1923). Quoted in Rohr, *Things Hidden*, 7.

^{vii} Richard Rohr, *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality* (Cincinnati, Ohio: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2008), 7

^{viii} I suppose Paul Tillich’s “You Are Accepted” sermon is the classic response to this position.

^{ix} Mark Nepo, “Who’s to Say,” in Nepo, *The Book of Awakening: Having the Life You Want by Being Present to the Life You Have* (Gift Edition) (Red Wheel Weiser, Kindle Edition), 71

^x Nepo, “Who’s to Say,” 71-72