

HERE I AM BY THE GRACE OF GOD
ISAIAH 6: 1-8; 1 CORINTHIANS 15: 1-11; LUKE 5: 1-11
FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
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Luke 5: 1-11

5 Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, 2 he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. 3 He 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. 4 When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." 5 Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." 6 When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. 7 So 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. 8 But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" 9 For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; 10 and 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." 11 When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

All three of our scripture readings this morning address the issue of vocation: the call of God in our daily lives. In each passage, the ones who are called feel unworthy. According to our gospel text, Simon Peter told Jesus, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" The prophet Isaiah was called by God long before Christ was born; but Isaiah, too, felt unworthy to be in God's presence. Listen for God's Word from Isaiah 6: 1-8.

Isaiah 6:1-8

In 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. 2 Seraphs 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. 3 And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." 4 The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. 5 And 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!" 6 Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 7 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." 8 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!"

Thanks be to God for this holy Word.

In our passage from First Corinthians, the Apostle Paul addressed several issues causing conflict in the congregation at Corinth. Members quarreled over which leader and which doctrine should be followed. Paul encouraged them to return to the basics of Christian faith. Paul testified to his own source of power and authority, both of which depended upon the grace of God. Listen for God's Word from *I Corinthians 15: 1-11*.

Now 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, 2 through 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. 3 For 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, 4 and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. 9 For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them--though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. 11 Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please pray with me. Holy and almighty God, we give thanks for your faithfulness throughout the ages. We give thanks for your call in Jesus Christ. Inspire us by your Word read and proclaimed so that we, too, follow Christ faithfully by the grace of God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

For John Calvin, our passage from Isaiah confirmed the mystery of God, as well as God's willingness to lovingly accommodate us so that we might understand and grow in faith (Calvin, Commentary on Isaiah 1-32, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003, 200). The same might be said of all three scripture passages this morning. God calls us in a way we can understand, often in a way that is both mysterious and empowering. God equips us for what God calls us to do.

Isaiah was called through a vision of God's holiness. Isaiah felt unclean until his lips were cleansed by coal from God's altar. In Isaiah's vision, God promised to give him the words to speak. God calls each of us in a unique way. God responds to our sense of unworthiness so that we are empowered to say yes.

Simon Peter, a fisherman, experienced God's call through a boatload of fish, more fish than Simon Peter could imagine. The experience was so amazing, it frightened him. "*Do not be afraid,*" Jesus told him. "*From now on you will be catching people.*" Jesus called Simon Peter right in the midst of his daily work. Jesus calls us wherever we are in life, too.

In our passage from First Corinthians, the Apostle Paul does not describe his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus. Conversion is a significant time in our lives, but so is our ongoing discipleship. Paul declared that his authority came from Christ by the grace of God. We serve by the grace of God, which is sufficient for anything we are called to do.

Isaiah, Simon Peter and Paul all felt unworthy. We, too, may feel unworthy. We, too, have been called. We are called by God in every moment of our lives. We are called to life long vocations and to particular tasks. We are called to love others as Christ loves us. We are called to be the body of Christ in a world that is no more Christ-like than it was when Jesus was crucified.

Paul told the Corinthians to get back to the basics of the Christian faith: *that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day... and that he appeared to the disciples and to others, including Paul.* Paul admitted that he was unworthy and guilty of sin. *For I am the least of the apostles, he said, 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. On the contrary, Paul declared, I worked harder than any of them--though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

So how about us? Do we feel unworthy today as we come for communion with our Savior? Are we focused on our limitations and our sinfulness? Do we feel inadequate because we are too young or too old or too weary or too busy? Do we think vocation, God calling, is for someone else? Have we been trying to tune God out?

As John Calvin observed, the Good News is that God will come to us in a way that we can comprehend. God will come to us right where we are, whether it is in church, on the golf course, at school or at work, in our front yard, at a scouts meeting or in the grocery store. God calls to us in the midst of life. The question we face, not once but many times during life, is whether or not we will follow Christ. Will we say yes to God's call today? It is not a question of worthiness. God's grace is sufficient. It is a question of faithfulness. If we join Isaiah in saying, "Here I am, Lord, send me," amazing things happen.

I received an email this week from a high school friend. We played doubles together in many tennis tournaments during high school, but we have not seen each other much in recent years. Not long ago my friend said yes to what she believes is God's call to prison ministry. She heard about the ministry at church and decided to check it out.

The first time she visited a prison, she went with an experienced volunteer. She was shaking as she watched him approach the first prisoner. It was a women's prison near Waco. The inmates in the unit they visited spent 23 of 24 hours in their cells, seven days a week. They were told to put sheets over the bars if they did not want to talk to the church people, and most of them had done so.

My friend stood at a distance and listened. All at once, she felt the Holy Spirit come over her, and she decided to give it a try. That day she said she prayed, read scripture aloud and cried. The sheets came down and more women wanted to visit. My friend now visits the prison regularly. Her call to prison ministry began with a minute for mission at her church. She says she will never be the same.

Kim Martin, a member of our congregation, has a particular call from God right now. Last week we visited about her concern for high school students, and Kim said I might share with you some of what we discussed. Kim handles attendance at the Georgetown High School, but her ministry for Christ goes way beyond record keeping.

Kim was serving as a mentor for two different girls in GISD when she took a job at the high school a few years ago. School policy required that she end her volunteer mentoring, but now she mentors hundreds of students. Kids come into her office for forms and other business, but then they start talking. They come back and talk some more. She sees the Lord at work in all this.

Students who serve as office aids usually are doing fine at home and at school, but that is not always the case for other students who visit Kim. Some kids don't have money for food, but they don't want to admit it. If you go upstairs to the office for the homeless, everybody knows. If you don't have money for lunch, they will give you a brown bag lunch, but every body knows. The various staff members try to reach out. It is complicated. It is ministry. Kim keeps a stash of snacks: soup, peanut butter crackers, granola bars and popcorn. Some kids are hungry for food and more.

The number of kids no longer living at home or whose families have moved in with other family members increases every day. Now Kim says they are dealing with middle-income families struggling because parents are laid off. About a third of the kids in school are receiving some kind of assistance for lunch.

Some kids become homeless because a parent is in jail. Kim said one student walks several miles to work for a minimum wage job. He pays for an apartment with social security and his wages. Others sleep at a friend's house on the couch. It's called couch surfing, and more kids are doing it. Can you believe parents would kick a high school child out of their house saying it is time they took care of themselves? Kim says it happens.

Kim does not proselytize, but she does have a cross or two in her office. Sometimes students talk about their faith or what they are doing at church. They ask questions, and Kim listens. They might tell her about their confirmation. Kim might give them a card or a few words of encouragement.

Officially, there are no gangs at the high school; but kids can no longer wear rosaries around their necks. They cannot have a rosary in their pockets because rosaries have been used to identify people with a gang. Who would have guessed? A white shirt and a rosary or a hoodie pulled over your head is enough to signal that you are in a gang. Gang member or not, Kim is there with a word of encouragement. She believes it is her call right now. Our call from God is often in the details, the little things we do and say.

Kim says our church's donations of food, \$20 gift cards, school supplies and money have been great. What the kids need as much as food and money is a mentor, someone who cares, someone who gives a word of encouragement, someone who shares the love of Christ.

Kim thinks some kids stop by her office when they have a restroom pass just to get a word of encouragement. "Hey, guess what?" they might say. "I thought I was going to flunk that test, and I made an 80." "Way to go," Kim will tell them. "I'm proud of you." Some kids do not receive encouragement at home. Some kids have no home. Classes are so crowded that teachers do not always have the time to give personal attention. The kids who really need a mentor often don't have the money or parental support for extra-curricular activities. Many do not have a church family, a coach, a scout leader or a friendly neighbor.

Over 900 students are now on a waiting list for mentors – people who will spend 30 minutes a week with them sometime during the school day – people who would encourage them and give them hope.

Kim believes God called her to her job and to her ministry with students. It is a ministry of love, one granola bar and one expression of encouragement at a time.

What is God calling you to do today? If we are unsure or if we feel unworthy, I hope we remember our scripture readings for this morning. Jesus tells us not to be afraid but to follow him. Like Paul, we are who we are, and God's grace toward us has not been in vain. As we have communion with our Lord this morning, I hope we respond like Isaiah and say, "Here I Am, Lord, send me."