

Epiphany 5 Year C February 10, 2019

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Do you ever have the experience of realizing you know things that you didn't realize you knew? This happens to me most often when I am doing crossword puzzles and they refer to some Eastern European oligarch or some random sports player from the 50's and my pencil without hesitation fills in the blank. Then I wonder where these things have been in my brain and how did they get there?

Other times I realize things that, of course, I knew that I knew a concept or theory or interpretation, but had never, to my memory, consciously thought of knowing it.

The thing that struck me that way this week was this:

We read the bible regularly and have had scholars and historians for centuries telling us about biblical times before and after Jesus and what language and social customs meant then as opposed to now. Most of us could easily share a summary of what happened in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

And still, we **don't** know even a mere fraction of everything that happened in Jesus life and ministry, and we **can only guess** at the numbers of people he *connected with* and what *their responses were*, and how they *embraced or turned away* from his good news.

What we do know is there must have been a *whole lot* of ordinary folks that were touched and responded to the one God and to the good news of His Son for the ensuing several thousand years of the faithful to have spread to the whole world and to have blossomed into a body of Christ, with all the sins, the failures and the drawbacks of individual humans, that we call the Church. I think that this is an important idea for us to hold in the back of our minds right now. Isaiah, Paul, and Simon Peter did not start out as rock stars, they started out as ordinary people.

In today's lessons we have 3 different stories from our salvation history that once they happened **were** considered significant enough that people made sure to record them to share with one another. And these three stories have at least one important thread that runs through them and ties them together. That thread is that our own sinfulness is not a deal breaker. And our relationship to the holy is grounded in recognizing our sinfulness, owning it in humility and gracefully accepting the fact that God loves us and calls us and uses us nonetheless. God's message is perfect, God's messenger doesn't need to be.

In the year that King Uzziah died...I so want to hear James Earl Jones reading this scripture passage because his voice has the kind of gravitas and resonance that I think it deserves. In the year that King Uzziah died the country is falling apart and no one knows if the new king will be faithful to God, or assert his independence. And a shocked Isaiah tell us he 'saw the Lord sitting on the throne'! We hear of Isaiah's vision, God's response and then Isaiah's response to God. (I read this week that the early church considered Isaiah to be the 5th gospel.)

Paul is dealing with the internal conflict in the gathered community in Corinth over the resurrection of the dead and the differing Hebrew, Roman and Christian interpretations. People are arguing and some are disputing the validity of what he says. In response he calmly recites his genealogy of being Christian, who he was, how he was involved, who he worked with and what he did, and how he was called to be an apostle. He did this in order to remind them of the authority of his words about the resurrection.

The Gospel comes to us as Luke's retelling of the story. Jesus, having walked through and away from the people who wanted to throw him off the cliff last week is now on the shores of Lake Gennesaret. Scholars tell us that Luke is more of a stickler for details because we are told that this is the same body of water that Matthew refers to as the Sea of Galilee but it is indeed a lake. We know that Jesus has people crowding about him to hear what he has to say and, in what we surmise is an attempt to be able to speak to them all, he simple turns to a fishing boat with his friend Simon in it and commandeers it to take him offshore to better speak to the crowd.

Three situations where something needs to be handled and God calls on some ordinary someone to do the work needing to be done. God's message is perfect but God's messengers don't need to be.

Isaiah, *awestruck* in the face of God is only conscious of his own failings and limitations in the overwhelming reality of God's presence. As he is bemoaning his sinfulness, one of the seraphim takes a burning coal from the altar and touches it to Isaiah's lips to remove his guilt and impurity. God upon the throne is calling for someone who can take on the critical mission to prophesy to the new King. And Isaiah, having received God's Grace say's Here I am Send Me.

When Paul is speaking to the Corinthians to justify his authority he doesn't enhance himself in any way but emphasizes his unworthiness and many faults on the path to his mission and ministry. He speaks of himself as untimely born which I am told means he was premature, suffering from side effects of that, and considered somewhat remarkable to still be alive. He recites all the horrid things he did to the Christian community and his persecution of them. Yet, Paul was *awestruck* by the presence of God on the Road to Damascus and in that moment became conscious of his sins and humbling himself before God became a willing servant responding to God's call to ministry.

A fisherman's life was not an easy one, it was a survival level kind of occupation that was grueling physically and not always rewarding despite the work put into it. Simon and his compatriots were by the Lake after a fruitless day doing the dirty work that followed from their fishing whether successful or not. This situation is a bit different from the others in that Jesus and Simon were known to one another. Jesus had stayed at his house, healed his mother-in-law, spoken with him. So, even though Simon was tired and probably not eager, he responded to Jesus request to use the boat as a podium and went back on out onto the lake.

We know what Jesus said in some other instances of gathered crowds but there is no record of what he preached from the boat that day. However, we do know what he did! He told Simon to throw out the nets. Simon said, but we did that all night, Jesus said, just do it ok, and Simon did. And then. Jesus turned nature on its side and provided for them fish abundant and they all came together to gather the catch.

On shore Simon who becomes Peter in the midst of this event is *awestruck* by Jesus obvious power and divinity realizing that he is so much more than the friend he thought he knew and falls at his feet confessing his sinfulness. And Jesus, Jesus did not tell him to go and sin no more as he so often did. He spoke one of his other most significant sayings; Don't be afraid. Don't be Afraid, as the angel said to Mary, as others have been told that are being called to new and unknown places. And, we are told, they left everything and followed him.

And this is where we come back to the idea about all those unknown, ordinary people over the years. We know that Jesus brought his message not to revolutionaries and mystics who tended to live apart from the community, not to the elite or the powerful but to ordinary, everyday folk.

All the way back in about the year 400 Augustine of Hippo wrote that Jesus did not choose orators, or senators, or emperors, because they could say they were worthy and chosen for their eloquence or their skill or their power. Though those people certainly could be used by God, those God chose were made worthy simply by being chosen.

Isaiah, Paul, and Simon Peter, were struck and humbled and aware of their limitations when they were in the presence of the Divine. They were not comparing themselves to their next door neighbors, to the powerful or the rich, favorably or unfavorably but measuring themselves in the light of God. And by what God has asked of them. Our sin, too, is in relation to God though we may act it out in relationship to one another. And God will call and make use of us because of our differences and not our perfections. God's Message is perfect, God's messengers don't need to be.

Think back to the Gospel, and the boats and the equipment and the huge haul of fish that we are told was abandoned at the Lake Side as Peter and John and James gave up their livelihood and followed Jesus. Peter and James and John may have been called to go out into the unknown but someone else was called as well. Someone to take care of all that was left behind. In the reality of the world, someone still needs to deal with the abundance of fish left on the shore so that they will not go to waste and the hungry will be fed, to deal with the equipment so that life will go on, deal with those who need care and support in the place that they are. They, too, are helping to build the kingdom and answering God's call in their own way. The important thing is to be cognizant of that fact.

Kathryn Matthews, the retired Dean of the Amistad Chapel at the UCC national offices tells a story about meeting Mother Theresa who told her:

Americans always want to leave their home and come work with me in India, I tell them "Stay here, right where you are, and love the people God has given you to love. Care for the people right where you are."

Whether we are called to leave everything, or be the one who stays behind we are the ordinary people who are challenged to move out of our comfort level, perhaps even confront our sin head on, but do what we can to build the peaceable kingdom of God.

So for a little practice at moving out of our comfort level and responding to God's call I invite you to stand if you are able.

Please raise your arms high in the air, and (repeat after me) (sing along with me) the refrain

Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?

I have heard you calling in the night.

I will go, Lord, if you lead me,

I will hold your people in my heart.

Amen, Alleluia.

Notes and Quotes:

"What does it mean to leave everything and follow Jesus? I think that it means that we let go of the idea that there will ever be enough *things* to secure our future if we don't make room in our boats, and in our hearts and our lives, for our sister's and brother's." *Kathryn Matthews*

"Your holiness shall consist of being truly human, not angelic. God has plenty of angels." *The Kotzker Rebbe 1787 - 1859*

"If you want to build a ship, don't herd people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea." *Antoine de Saint-Exupery*

"...everyone is invited to look for the intersection of their passions and talents and the world's need. God calls and equips the baptized for ministry." Samuel Giere

"We're strange creatures, more lovely than we think and more sinful than we imagine, too hard and too easy on our selves all at the same time." *Fr. Ron Rolheiser*

"It's not a question of are you a sinner? It's only a question of what is your sin?" *quoted by Fr. Ron Rolheiser unattributed.*

*Excerpts from a lengthy quote used by the Right Rev. Andy Doyle* : There are several kinds of words used for nets in the New Testament...Scholars point out that the nets used for fishing like a casting net (is) generally pear shaped. The word Jesus uses when telling Peter that they will be fishers of men is a seine net or a drag net.'... Jesus used this word because the community the disciples was to build was to be universal and catholic - everyone was included. Dragnets gather in everything because they dredge the sea floor... capture wood, plants, fish edible and inedible...the community that God is making connects or networks all kinds of people...weeds and detritus of dysfunctional relationships and human brokenness...not just souls, but bodies, and not just people, but all things, animal, vegetable and mineral."

"It occurs to me just now, after having loved this iconic passage from Isaiah my entire life, that maybe the tongs and the live coals were compensatory like the Scarecrow's diploma, the Tin Man's heart shaped watch and the Lion's medal in the movie The Wizard of Oz. Maybe it was just easier for the seraphim to do something to alleviate Isaiah's theophanic anxiety and perform a quick sin blotting rite than take the time to deal with a whole lot of explanation. How bad were Isaiah's sins anyway?" *Suzanne Guthrie*

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