

**5 Epiphany, Year C –
Isaiah 6:1-8 (9-13); 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11; Psalm 138
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For those of you who don't know, the lessons we read each week are not chosen at random. They come from the official lectionary, which gives us Sunday readings on a three-year cycle. In it we cover the New Testament pretty well but our coverage of the Old Testament is pretty spotty. This is because only one-third of our readings are out of the Old Testament yet this collection of books represents about three-fourths of the Bible as a whole.

This year we began using a new lectionary – the Revised Common Lectionary – that has been designed to provide us with a better view of the Old Testament. I am particularly happy with the changes reflected in this morning's Old Testament reading because it serves to really bring the three readings together into a very consistent message. All three readings are about the process by which one hears and responds to God's call.

The reading from Isaiah really sets the stage for us as it is all about Isaiah's call to become a prophet. In it, Isaiah has a vision of the majesty of the Lord on his throne surrounded by seraphs. Immediately, Isaiah is confronted by his own unworthiness, his sinful nature. He expresses this unworthiness by saying, "Woe is me! I am lost for I am a man of unclean lips." It is interesting to note that the very essence of his weakness, his unclean lips, is to become the essence of his strength in his calling to be a prophet. So often God works this way by turning our greatest weaknesses into our greatest strengths when we submit to God's call to serve.

In the passage, the seraph cleanses Isaiah's unclean lips with a live coal taken from the altar, symbolizing the cleansing of our sins in the waters of baptism. With the burden of his sin lifted from him, Isaiah is now in a position to hear and respond energetically to God's call.

In our second lesson from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he talks about his own call to become an apostle. Once again, the very essence of his sinfulness, the fact that he so doggedly persecuted the early church, becomes the key to his call – to spread the good news throughout the known world.

Also, as in the case of Isaiah, Paul is confronted by the enormity of his own sinfulness, he is given the free gift of forgiveness for that sinfulness and God calls him to turn his very weakness into a gift to be used in his calling of service to God.

Finally, in our Gospel lesson from Luke, we find our old friend Peter and learn of his epiphany that led to his conversion. In Luke's gospel, we first meet Peter in the previous chapter when Jesus, after teaching in the synagogue, enters Peter's house and cures his mother-in-law of a high fever. Apparently, witnessing this miracle was not sufficient to convert Peter. Who knows, maybe Peter didn't really appreciate having his mother-in-law restored to health.

In any case, we later find Jesus with Peter and his fellow fishermen at the lake at Gennesaret where they practiced their trade. This time, Jesus performs the miracle of the great catch of fish, seemingly just for Peter and his fellows. Despite Peter's expert opinion that there are no fish in the area to be netted, they cast their nets and haul in so great a catch that the boats are insufficient to contain the haul.

I've been a fisherman all my life and have heard and told quite a few "fish" stories but this is about the best. It is so great not because it is about the one that got away, as most fish stories are, but about the ones that seemingly appeared out of nowhere.

It is this miracle that serves as Peter's epiphany. Suddenly, as with both Isaiah and Paul, Peter is confronted by his own sinfulness and inadequacy. He says to Jesus, "Get away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man." Somehow, this experience has made Peter both acutely aware of his own failings and of Jesus' divinity. Whereas before he referred to Jesus with the Greek word *epistates*, indicating someone who is a delegated authority or an appointee for office, now he calls Jesus *kurios*, which is used to refer to someone in supreme authority.

As the result of Peter's newfound awareness of both his own sinfulness and of Jesus' divinity, Christ cleanses him of his sin, saying, "do not be afraid," and he gives him his marching orders, "From now on you will be catching people."

Together, these three stories provide a clear picture of how we receive God's call. First, something happens that shakes us out of our lethargy and false sense of self-sufficiency. It may be a vision or visitation, as in the case of Isaiah and Paul, or it may be a miracle, as in the case of Peter. Or it may be a calamity, like a devastating earthquake or hurricane or the loss of a loved one or one's own health. Sadly, we all fall into the trap of believing we are in control and not really in need of God's grace until something traumatic happens to rock our foundations. Who knows, maybe if we weren't all so stubborn and pig-headed, there wouldn't need to be so much calamity and misfortune in the world.

Usually the first reaction when confronted by the power of the almighty is one of abject fear and the desire to get away from the source of that fear. As Peter said, "Get away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." When we become the most tuned in to God, we become most acutely aware of our own weakness, inadequacy and sinfulness.

Then something completely magical happens. As God's grace enters us, the fear is replaced by a sense of peace and warmth as our sins and weakness are lifted from us. Imagine how Paul must have felt when he realized that in his zeal, he had been persecuting the one true God and at the same time to know that even this great sin was forgiven. No wonder he went blind.

But then, as we see from these three stories, one more thing happens. As we are bathed in God's love and grace, we become acutely aware of God's call to serve and that no

matter what our weaknesses and frailties, God will give us the strength and skills to accomplish the tasks God has in store for us. Isaiah received his call to prophesy, Paul was to evangelize much of the known world and Peter was to found the Church. None of them came to their ministries with the skills necessary for the tasks assigned but God blessed each of them with the gifts they needed.

Sadly for most of us, it will take a major calamity to cause us to open up to God's call. In our comfortable lives, it is easy to push God away or play lip service to our faith, not really listening to God. Most of us will need a miracle or a crisis in our lives to make us aware of our own brokenness and to receive the blessing of God's love and forgiveness. Then we could really hear what God wants us to do.

But maybe, just maybe we could all try just a bit harder to spend a little more time in prayer and reflection to see if we can listen for God's voice in our lives. Perhaps we can recall a time when we experienced a miracle or when we were at our wits' end and needed God's help. Perhaps we can recall that feeling of helplessness and weakness that would allow us to open ourselves to God. Then just maybe we might hear and listen to that call.