

February 6, 2022
“Worthy from the Start”
Isaiah 6:1-8 / Luke 5:1-11
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

The two scripture texts Carl just read for us have a lot in common, most notably linked in the lectionary as call stories.

The call of Isaiah, the 8th-century Judean prophet, stepping into the unknown responsibility of prophetic witness. Isaiah, who in a vision boldly responds to God's question, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” with “Here I am; send me!”

And the call of Peter, along with the brothers James and John, stepping into the unknown commitment of discipleship. Peter, James and John, who upon witnessing a miraculous catch of fish initiated by Jesus, and then hearing Jesus' claim that from now on they will be fishing for people, come back to the shore in their boats, and immediately leave everything, EVERYTHING, behind to follow him.

Response to divine calling is at the heart of these texts, but I want us to rewind a bit. I want us to see and hear Isaiah, and Peter, James and John, BEFORE their faithful, celebrated responses.

Isaiah, confronted in his dramatic vision with the glory of God, the holiness of God, the loftiness of God, is overwhelmed. Afraid. Filled with self-doubt and shame.

“Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips . . .” His instinct is to confess, seeing himself as unfit, unworthy in God's presence.

But Isaiah's vision continues, with one of the angelic seraphs touching his mouth with a hot coal from the altar and declaring him free from guilt and sin. Worthy. And I would suggest that this ritual is not some kind of divine magic trick, turning sinner into saint, but a ritual designed for Isaiah's benefit, to remind and reassure him, in admittedly dramatic fashion, that he is not defined by his sin. He is already worthy. He is already enough.

Because it's with that reassurance, that starting point, that Isaiah is then able to respond to God's calling without hesitation: "Here am I; send me!" Isaiah has to see himself as God sees him, as worthy from the start, defined not by his sin but by his sacred worth, his belovedness, before he can respond to the call.

Brendan Manning writes, "Define yourself radically as one beloved by God. This is the true self. Every other identity is illusion. God's love for you and (God's) choice of you constitute your worth. Accept that, and let it become the most important thing in your life."

It's the same for the first disciples. Fishermen by trade, on the shore with their boats, busy cleaning their nets, they are met by Jesus, who joins them. Who asks Simon to put the boat out a ways, and after teaching the crowds gathered along the shore line, encourages Simon to put out even farther, into the deep water, and let down his nets for a catch.

Simon and company had just come in from a long night of fishing, with nothing to show for it. He is, no doubt, exhausted and frustrated, and so understandably skeptical of Jesus' request. But he does it because Jesus tells him to, and just like that, the nets are overwhelmed with fish, so much so that they have to bring in another boat to carry the haul – and even then the boats are slowly sinking under the weight.

At that we find these common, would-be disciples, in their vulnerability. Simon falls down at Jesus' knees, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am sinful man!" Like Isaiah before him, his instinct is to confess, seeing himself as unfit, unworthy in Jesus' presence. In the presence of holiness and miracle.

We're told that Simon and James and John and everyone else were amazed, in awe, at the catch. They can't believe it. They are overwhelmed by the bounty of divine blessing. And apparently overwhelmed with fear because, though Simon never says he is afraid, Jesus' intuitive instinct is to offer words of reassurance: "Do not be afraid; . . ." DO NOT be afraid.

We're not told what Simon and the disciples are afraid of, but we know that fear and insecurity go hand in hand. So, if nothing else, we can safely assume that they are afraid that they will not measure up. That they ARE not, WILL NOT be enough – as those prone, like the rest of us, to drop the ball, to turn away from the kind of love that God requires. You know that feeling. I know that feeling.

And so Jesus knows that they need to see themselves as he sees them, as God sees them, as beloved, worthy from the start, BEFORE they can risk vulnerability and respond to his divine call to become fishers of people. To become disciples in the way of love.

Worthiness, seeing OURSELVES as fundamentally worthy, of sacred worth, WITHOUT giving attention to the voices in our own heads or in the world around us telling us otherwise, WITHOUT need to endlessly prove our worth or our giftedness to those illusionary voices and so able to just BE our uniquely gifted selves, IS the starting point.

As Brene Brown suggests, "Worthiness doesn't have prerequisites owning our worthiness is the act of acknowledging that we are sacred." Worthy from the start.

And Steve Garnaas-Holmes, reflecting on the Luke text, offers this blessing:

"Don't believe the voices you hear
coming up out of the grave in your head,
snaking around you from the shadows,
saying you are not worthy.
Yes, a miracle shimmers under your feet,
yes, you draw wonders from dark mysteries,
yes, you hold the shoals of heaven in your hands,
yes, glory you can't yet see is more than we can bear.
Yes, and you are worthy,
you are worthy.
The miracle beneath the surface
is not yours to hide.
Open yourself, and be astounded.

Then get up off your knees and come.

The world needs that light."

It is in accepting and learning to embrace our own sacred worth that we open ourselves to the astonishment of divine blessing. And less and less afraid, we are able to open ourselves up, more and more, to listen for and hear and respond, in faith, to the divine calling in our lives. Whatever that looks like for each of us, as fellow builders of a kin-dom defined by radically inclusive and generous love for all.

Worthy from the start, and so WILLING – though always prone, of course, to fear and so still prone to sin against God and each other and ourselves – to take the leap of faith and boldly respond to God's perpetual question, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" Like Isaiah and the first disciples. Like so many ordinary sinner-saints who have paved the path before. The Bible is full of examples. Our lives are full of examples.

Let me close by simply drawing your attention to one of the verses in the song we're about to sing, *The Summons*.

It's a song about the invitation to respond to the divine call on our lives, to follow Jesus in the way of radical compassion and justice, in the way that promises to leave us and the world around us forever changed.

But one verse, in particular, speaks to the kind of risk, the kind of vulnerability, that comes with the call. Before we respond.

Verse 4: "Will you love the 'you' you hide if I but call your name? / Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same? / Will you use the faith you've found to reshape the world around, / through my sight and touch and sound in you, and you in me?"

Will you? Will we? As those worthy from the start, may we be so willing.

May it be so.