

### **Luke 5:1-11**

Epiphany 5C + February 10, 2019  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho  
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A Frightening Savior

The Word of the Lord from Luke 5:8, 10b: "But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.' ... And Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.'" This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We begin with our Old Testament reading from Isaiah 6, where the prophet Isaiah has his vision of the temple. He has entered the inner sanctum, the Most Holy Place, for he sees the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up. The train of His robe fills the temple; and above Him stand the seraphim, heavenly creatures with six wings. The seraphim are not silent: they call out to one another. And of all the attributes of God they could be talking about, they focus on one: His holiness. "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts," they cry. "The whole earth is full of His glory!"

The Most Holy Place is a sizeable room, a perfect cube of thirty feet on each side; but the Lord enthroned on high would take up a lot of that space; and remember, the seraphim stand and fly above Him yet. The reason I bring this up is that I don't see how the scene fits inside a thirty-foot cube: it's as if the room is bigger on the inside than it is on the outside. Better, I think it is this: the Most Holy Place is God's dwelling place with His people on earth in Isaiah's time, and He's the same God who reigns over all things in heaven. If God is enthroned in both places, one could say that that room is where heaven and earth come together. In other words, and I admit I'm guessing, the vision sounds as if, when Isaiah enters the room, it's not clear if he's still on earth or has stepped into heaven, or maybe has one foot in each.

Isaiah's reaction, though, should not surprise us: there's no better way to know how holy you're *not* than to be confronted by God who is. Held up to His glory, Isaiah's sins and sinfulness stand out in sharp relief. Like a man who's been living in darkness might cringe when confronted by the sun, Isaiah declares, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" Ever since Moses asked to see God's face in Exodus 33, it's been known that sinners cannot look on the face of God and live. It doesn't sound like Isaiah needs a Bible verse to remind him, though.

One of the seraphim flies to Isaiah, holding a burning coal in his hand. Fire destroys, fire refines, and fire hurts when it burns. The seraph touches Isaiah's lips, and says, "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." The coal doesn't burn Isaiah, but it does purify him. It makes him holy so that he can stand in presence of God. The pain of refinement for his sin will go to Someone else who atones for it.

The Lord purifies Isaiah, then calls him to be a prophet, to speak the truth to a people that doesn't want to hear the Word of God he is given to preach. Most will reject it, but the Lord has promised that His Word will go forth; and here He declares that a remnant will believe and be saved. The Lord purifies and calls Isaiah that day: what a blessing! However, it will not seem so in this world. Isaiah will faithfully preach the Word of God, the Word will be rejected, and tradition holds that Isaiah dies a martyr's death.

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Fast forward to our Gospel lesson, where Jesus sits in Simon Peter's boat. They've met before: if you remember last week's gospel lesson, Jesus spent a day in Capernaum teaching in the synagogue, healing diseases and casting out demons. He defeated evil after evil without breaking a sweat; and among those whom He healed that day was Peter's mother-in-law. One minute, she was lying in bed with a high fever; the next, thanks to Jesus, she was fully restored and serving. Remember how that reading ended: Jesus kept on healing people well into the night, but He departed because, He said, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose" (Luke 4:43).

Here's Jesus, doing what He was sent to do, preaching the good news of the kingdom of God to a crowd. They've pressed upon Him to the edge of the lake, and now He teaches from Peter's boat. We assume that Peter was there in Capernaum to see his mother-in-law healed; but if he wasn't, he certainly heard about it. Now the Teacher who heals is in his boat, and Peter has a front row seat; and when Jesus is finished, He tells Peter, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch."

Peter objects, though weakly: "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing!" Peter is a fisherman by trade, and he and his crew have just been skunked. Getting fishing tips from a rabbi is like asking me to fix your car. However, this is the Teacher and Healer who speaks with authority; so even if it seems a hopeless exercise, he says, "But at Your Word I will let down the nets." But only because it's you who says so, Jesus.

The nets fill with fish, so much that they begin to break. They need partners in another boat to help them bring in the catch, and the fish are so many that the boats start to sink. Could there be anything better for men who make a living by fishing than to have a catch so big that they can barely get it all to shore? It's unbelievable abundance! It translates into bonuses all around. This is a time for the fishermen to join together in festive chorus of, "Happy days are here again!"

Not Peter. He falls at Jesus' knees and says, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."

But why? The text says that "he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken." You'd think that he'd be like the crowd in Capernaum, asking Jesus to stick around longer. But no: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."

What does this mean? Does this mean that Peter lacks faith? Hardly. It means that Peter's understanding of the faith, though far from perfect, is more developed than most. Peter is aware, painfully aware, that the Man in the boat is no ordinary preacher who just happens to be able to perform miracles. This miraculous catch of fish has revealed that this Man in his boat is the Lord of heaven and earth. The sea is His, and He made it, says Psalm 95, and to Him is given dominion over the fish of the sea (Ps. 8). This net is full because the Man in the boat is God in the flesh. And if the man in the boat is God in the flesh, then the man in the boat is holy God ... and the best way to know how holy you're *not* is to be confronted by God who is.

So, long after Isaiah's vision in the temple, we have another moment where unholy man comes face-to-face with holy God. For Peter, there's no seraph, but the Lord Himself. Jesus doesn't cleanse with a burning coal, but with words: "Do not be afraid," He says; "from now on you will be catching men."

"Do not be afraid," says Jesus. This is absolution: the only reason Peter need not be afraid is if the Lord speaks his unholiness away. The same Jesus who spoke to Isaiah from the throne now says to Peter in so many words, "Your guilt is taken away, and your sin is atoned for."

The same Jesus who called Isaiah to be a prophet now calls Peter to be His disciple: "From now on you will be catching men." So Jesus makes Peter holy, and Jesus calls Peter to be His messenger.

What a blessing! However, it will not seem so to the world. Peter will preach, some will believe and many will not, and the early Church tells us that he too dies as a martyr.

But his guilt is taken away and his sin is atoned for. The Lord who speaks Peter's sin away takes it onto Himself, and bears it – along with all the sins of the world – to the cross. There, He sheds His blood and offers up His life. He dies so that Isaiah and Peter might be numbered among His holy people. You too.

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"From now on you will be catching men." It's a funny one, this word "catching." It means to "catch and keep alive," or perhaps even to "catch for life." Not catch and release, not catch and kill for dinner; but catch and keep alive.

You've been caught. The Holy Spirit has called you by the gospel, enlightened you with His gifts, sanctified and kept you in the true faith. He hasn't zapped you from the heavens, but He's caught you in the usual way: by means of the Word of God. For Jesus' sake, He's caught you. For Jesus' sake, He's made you alive. For Jesus' sake, He's made you holy.

In fact, you also come into contact with the Lord Most High. For Isaiah, it was God in His glory on a throne. For Peter, He was nearer – God in the flesh on a boat, close enough to touch. For you, He is nearer still: He is God in the flesh in bread and wine, given to you to eat and drink for the forgiveness of sins. Same Lord of heaven and earth, and you acknowledge that it is so in the liturgy as you sing the song of the seraphim. They sang "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth" as they looked upon the Lord on His throne. You sing the same thing just before the Lord's Supper, as you are soon to look upon the Lord in bread and wine on the altar. The same Lord of heaven and earth, crucified and risen and giving Himself for you.

So ... do you tremble? Are you terrified like Isaiah because your lips are unclean? Are you frightened like Peter because you are sinful?

If not, why not? This is a problem rampant in Christianity because the Church is full of sinners, and sinners like to think in terms of "good" or "good enough," rather than "holy." You can see this in American Christianity, where Jesus is usually portrayed as a friend, a therapist or a kindly grandpa who exists to give you stuff, and then a big hug to tell you that your sins aren't so bad after all. Friends, therapists and kindly grandpas aren't scary; and in the age where the greatest sin that man has invented is to make somebody *feel* bad, it seems especially ill-advised to tell people that Jesus can be terrifying, specifically because they *are* bad.

Compare that to a story that a seminary professor related to me. He was in a country that had once been behind the Iron Curtain, doing some teaching to help the Church there get back on its feet. He was invited to worship in the basement of the building at the end of the day. He arrived early to find an empty room, save for an altar up front and one bench along the back wall. He sat on the bench and waited; and one by one, others entered. As they came in, they prostrated themselves, lying face down on the floor, facing the altar with arms outstretched and totally silent. Eventually, a young woman prostrated herself on the floor next to the bench. After a few minutes, she looked up at the professor and said, "What is wrong? Don't you believe that God is here?"

Do you believe that God is here – the holy Lord of hosts, here? If so, should that fill you with fear?

Yes. And no.

Why was Isaiah afraid? Because he was a man of unclean lips – because he was unholy. Why was Peter afraid? Because he was a sinful man – because he was unholy. Why does the Small Catechism say you should fear God? Because God threatens to punish all who transgress His commandments; therefore you should fear His wrath and not act contrary to them. That you are sinful, that you have unclean lips, and that you are unholy should fill you with fear. It should have you carefully preparing and examining yourself before you come to the altar, lest you take your sin lightly and skip into the Lord's holy presence like it's no big thing. It is why you make it a point to clean up your life and resist temptation, lest you stay comfortable with your unholiness and take it with you to the Last Day – and then hear the Lord say, "Depart from me." If you are not afraid of God's holy wrath, it does not mean that your faith is strong. It means quite the opposite.

So, yes: it is most appropriate to be afraid of God – if you take His holiness, and your unholiness, seriously.

But if that's the case, why are you here? Until Christ returns, you can't get closer to holy God than His Word and His Sacraments; and yet you draw near. You sing the song of the seraphim, but not of Isaiah or Peter: you don't sing "Woe is me" or "Depart from me, O Lord." You draw near because you know this remarkable truth: Jesus Christ, the holy Son of God, became flesh to make you holy. He did it not by purifying you with a burning fire; instead, He took all your sins and impurities – everything that makes you unholy – and He shouldered them. He carried them to the cross. Crucified by man, He suffered the fire of God's wrath for your sin. He shed His holy and precious blood for you, for your transgressions.

Why? Not to stoke the fire of His righteous rage against your sin all the more, but to say, "I forgive you." Not to say, "Depart from Me," but "Because of My death, you are holy: draw near and stay with Me." Not to touch your lips with a hot coal, but with His own body and blood to take away your sins and make you holy. You draw near like all those diseased and afflicted that we heard about last week, and you depart fully forgiven, fully cleansed, fully holy.

In Christ, you are God's holy people, set free from sin and death. What a blessing for you ... though we should probably point out that the world will not see it as such. In fact, before we wrap this up, it is good to point out one more thing: even if you are not called to be a prophet like Isaiah or an apostle like Peter, the Lord still gives you His Word to speak in whatever callings you have. You have the assurance that when you speak His Word, the Holy Spirit is at work in it; and you also have the assurance that when you speak His holy Word, the world will not always receive it well. But whatever the matter might be, whether the cross, the existence of God or the sanctity of human life, make sure that your speech or your silence is determined by God's Word and wisdom, not by your fear of sinners. As those redeemed in Christ, we should rejoice to speak His Word and fear not doing so; but usually in a sinful world, we are inclined to just the opposite.

The world lives in fear of God, even if it denies Him, because it lives in constant fear of death – it fears the wages of sin, even if it denies sin. That's a horrible way to live. Blessed are you: for while you rightly fear God's wrath, you also know of His grace. By His holy, precious blood, the Lord declares to you, "Your guilt is taken away and your sins are atoned for. Do not be afraid, because you are forgiven for all of your sins."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen