

## 3 EPIPHANY

JANUARY 18/21/22, 2017

## FIRST, MARSHALL

PASTOR SCOTT FULLER

ISAIAH 6:1-13; LUKE 5:1-11

*God's Grace Is Sufficient**Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.**Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own, that in hearing we may believe, and in believing, we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Have you ever found yourself:

-facing a **frustrating** task that nevertheless **had** to be **finished**?-confronted by a **complicated command** that still had to be completed?-**bent** under a **burden** that seemed almost unbearable?We learn a *great deal* about **ourselves**, about **life**, and about God-in-our-lives when we're pushed to go *beyond* what we think we can endure.I'll never forget *my* first experience of that important life lesson. After completing my freshman year at Concordia College up in Moorhead, I went back to Montana to find work for the summer. My brother-in-law encouraged me to get a job on the oil rigs, a business that was booming there during the mid-seventies.

This truly was *uncharted territory* for me – heck, I hadn't even seen a rig *up close*, let alone work on one, but I knew that the **money** was very good. So...I showed up at the office...application in hand...twice a week...for 28 days...until they finally hired me, if **only** to get me **out** of their **secretary's hair!**

Speaking of hair, believe it or not, I actually had a **lot** of it in those days, and I wore it down to my shoulders. That night I met my new boss. He took one look at me, removed his cowboy hat to reveal a flat-top and said, "Gonna get your hair-cut tomorrow?" I simply said, "Yes, sir," because I wanted that job way more than I wanted long hair...although now that I think about it...

Anyway, you've heard that old saying, *You'd better be careful of what you pray for because you might just get it!*? That's exactly how **I** felt later that night. I was **very nervous** when we finally pulled up to the rig for our graveyard shift. Lights were **glaring**, engines **whining**, smoke **billowing**, ground **shaking** and mud...mud **gushing up** from the hole that was being drilled – it all made me wonder if I'd even survive my first night on the job, let alone the next three months!

I was shown around the rig for the first 30 minutes. Then the driller handed me a shovel, and for the 7 ½ hours, I lay on my stomach:

- under the rig
- shoveling gravel and mud
- pushing it down a trench
- to keep the flow from flooding the drill site.

For the rest of that shift, I **cursed** myself for ever wanting the job. The next day when I complained to my brother-in-law who grew up around rigs, he assured me that I'd be just fine. *If you say so*, I replied, not quite so convinced.

But by the end of the summer, I was more than *fine*. I was in the best shape of my life, I had enough money for the next year of college, and I was very pleased with what I'd done, having been pushed far beyond what I ever thought I could do.

Yet I knew **better** than anyone – I wasn't hired because I exhibited the skills that were needed to do the job. **Instead**, I was given the opportunity to **learn** on the job and had the support of my sister and brother-in-law helping me get good at doing something totally new...

We see a similar sort of thing at work in the people from our Bible lessons for today. In the O.T. passage, Isaiah is filled with fear when, in his vision, he finds himself suddenly in the *inner sanctum*, in the **Holy of Holies**, in the *fearsome presence* of Almighty God.



Theologian David Lose tells us that Isaiah sees himself in the innermost part of ***the Temple***, *the place where **GOD** lives. And not God understood as the Prodigal Son's adoring and loving father, but:*

- *God, whose name is too holy to say,*
- *God, whose being holds the very cosmos together;*
- *God, whose unmediated presence is too great for mortals to endure.*

He continues: Think of the final *scene of Raiders of the Lost Ark when the ark is opened and calamity is unleashed on those foolishly daring to look at the treasure, the holiness of God.*

Now, we're told in v. 3 that the angel-like seraphs were flying around singing *holy, holy, holy...* which also happens to be the title of the hymn my childhood church sang every Sunday as our opening song. Far from fearsome, that stately old hymn **always** fills me with comfort. If you remember it, sing the first verse with me:

*Holy, holy, holy Lord God almighty Early in the morning my song shall rise to thee  
Holy, holy, holy Merciful and mighty God in three persons, blessed Trinity*

That sounded beautiful and peaceful – and apparently, completely unlike what the seraphs were actually experiencing. *O.T. professor Rolf Jacobson argues, in fact, that the Seraphs were actually **crying out not in melodic song but in agony** from being so close to God's unmediated, unfiltered, uninsulated holiness.*

(<http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1617>)

Literally translated, the word seraph, means *burning one*. So here's the stage:

- brightly glowing angelic beings were flapping their wings,
- crying out in terror, *Holy Moly, get me outta here!!!***
- smoke was **billowing**, and
- the earth was **shaking**...

And the **only** thing **Isaiah** can do is ***cry out too, Woe is me, I am lost, for I'm a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips!***

And yet...and yet...

- God's wrath does not smite him,
- God's holiness does not destroy him,
- God's power does not overwhelm him.

Instead,

- God's concern **catches** him,
- God's almost mournful request **intrigues** him,
- God's engaging invitation ultimately inspires him to say,  
*Here am I, send me.*

Our Gospel story also tells of a man who feels unfit. After a fruitless and frustrating night of fishing, Peter lets Jesus use his boat as a pulpit. When he's done teaching, Jesus tells Peter to go back out to the deep and try once more to catch some fish.

Now, Peter is less than enthusiastic about this carpenter telling him where and when to fish, but after a muted grumble he humors the man.

And what happens next changes his life, for they catch so many fish that the **nets** begin to *break*!



It's an experience that catches Peter off guard and throws him for a loop. Falling down at Jesus' knees, in the bright light of the sun, he cries out from the depths of his soul, *Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!*

With that net-bursting catch of fish, Peter's whole world has shifted. His eyes are opened and he truly sees that this carpenter/teacher is so much more than a builder of furniture or a preacher.

**Suddenly**, Peter sees his friend as a *foreigner*, a *stranger* – one about whom the rumors of his miraculous birth might just now be proved true.

And IF they **are** true... (here you can almost sense the synapses snapping in Peter's brain!)...if **all** that stuff is **true**, then Jesus is no mere Jew like him, but **THE HOLY ONE OF GOD** for whom the people have been waiting...FOREVER!! It **shakes** him to the **core** of his **soul**: *Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!* He realizes that he's in the holy presence of God and, just like Isaiah, that LIGHT exposes all the dark areas of our hearts – and it leaves him feeling sinful, sickly, insincere!

Yet...

-God's wrath does not smite him,  
-God's holiness does not destroy him,  
God's power does not overwhelm him.

Instead, Jesus' heartfelt concern catches him – ***Don't be afraid*** says the Lord. And his engaging invitation, ***From now on you'll be catching people*** – both honors Peter's **past** profession and, at the same time, pushes Peter forward into that brave, new scary world called “being a disciple of Jesus Christ.”

When they brought their boats to shore, Peter, James and John *left everything and followed Jesus*. In other words, Peter's response was also to say, *If you say so, Lord...*

The similarities between these stories are wonderfully clear. From Isaiah to Peter, the story is the same. **Both men feel like failures, feel frail, feel afraid.** Yet both are **also** able to answer God's call NOT because they come equipped with the **spirit**, the **knowledge**, the **experience** to assure success – far from it.

Theologian Wesley Allen says,

*As Peter himself acknowledges, he and his partners are **failures** at their job. They fished all night and caught “nothing.” The very reason Jesus can commandeer Simon’s boat is because there’re **no fish** in it -- plenty of room available!*

*Jesus does not call these men because they’ve exhibited gifts and graces for apostleship (or even for fishing). Jesus calls them after he’s shown that **he can catch fish through them** when they can’t do so on their own. Simon’s **not** called to “catch people” (verse 10) because **he’ll be good** at it, but because **Jesus** can do it **through** him.*

*And so it is with us. Allen concludes, The moment when we humbly recognize that we have nothing worthy to bring into Christ’s presence for the ministry of the church may be the very moment when Christ begins to use us in ways we never could have imagined.*

([https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3000](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3000))

The good news here, the over-arching good news in **both** stories, is that we are *all* being called by God through Jesus to serve the people whom God loves – you, and me, and everyone everywhere.

The One who has defeated death and sin is constantly calling us from defeat to determination, from fear to faith, from loathing to love, from guilt to grace – God’s Spirit working in us promises *to use us in ways we never could have imagined*.

And finally, this very same thing also happens to the Apostle Paul. You remember him – he goes from being a persecutor of Christians to a proclaimer of Christ’s love and grace for all people. This man, who has an acute awareness of sin’s darkness in his soul, shares how he prayed three times asking God to remove a *thorn in his side* (whatever that was). Look to the screens to see the Lord’s response (let’s all read it together):

**9“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”**  
**10 Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong (1 Cor. 12:9b, 10)**

And we know that as God did with Isaiah, Peter and Paul,  
-and as God has done with people of all places and times,  
-so God has done and will continue to do with me and with you.

From out of our frailty and fear, God promises to fashion hearts that are firm in faith, even as God promises to work through us – to work **miracles** through us – maybe by using talents we've developed, but that's not required. As was said earlier about Peter: Jesus doesn't call him to "*catch people*" (verse 10) *because he'll be good at it, but because Jesus can do it through him.*

And from there, watch out – who knows what God will do through the likes of me and you!! Amen