

Scripture Readings and Sermon

February 6, 2022 by Rev. Mark Brechin

Commentary on Isaiah 6:1-10

Typically referred to as the "call of Isaiah", the call comes at a critical time in the history of Israel and Judah. Following the death of Solomon, the ten northern tribes known as Israel separated from the two southern tribes of Benjamin and Judah. The people of the covenant were now divided and with each passing generation the division grew deeper. While Judah often had problems with Egypt, Israel had to deal with Syria and Assyria (Iraq). As Assyria grew more powerful, Israel formed an alliance with Syria and asked Judah to join. After King Uzziah died, King Ahaz of Judah allied with Assyria and challenged by the kings of Israel and Syria. It is during this time of conflict known as the Syro-Ephraimite war (735) that Isaiah receives his call. While humanity was in conflict and divided, Isaiah witnesses all of heaven praising God. The contrast causes Isaiah to proclaim, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips". And yet, when God calls for someone to bring the divine word into an unclean world, Isaiah responds with "Here I am" which in Hebrew literally means, "I am here, see me!" The message Isaiah is to proclaim, however, is not one of freedom but of captivity. With Israel as a northern buffer taken into captivity by Assyria and lost to history, events were set in motion that would eventually lead to the Babylonian captivity of Judah in less than a century later. God often calls us to leave something before we can begin something new. Leaving is not always easy or painless.

Isaiah 6:8 And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

Have you ever volunteered without knowing the specifics?

How do you think Isaiah reacted upon hearing the words of gloom?

Can you hear his dread in the statement "How long?"?

What type of reception do you think Isaiah got?

Have you ever had to give really bad news?

When have you had to tell an unpopular truth?

Commentary on Luke 5:1-11

The lectionary jumps from Jesus leaving Nazareth to the calling of the disciples. As noted in his preaching at the synagogue, people were already beginning to recognize that Jesus is a master teacher of religion. So many people want to hear about God that he needs to go out on a boat to address everyone. After the teaching, he turns to Simon and tells this fisherman where to fish. Who was this person who did not grow up near water telling a fisherman where to fish? What Simon was not expecting was a fishing lesson. Despite his hesitation and against his better judgment as a fisherman, Simon did as Jesus directed and witnessed the power of God. Simon soon finds out that Jesus is not just knowledgeable about God but also about fishing. Jesus is more than just a religious specialist, Jesus is a Master of life. It was at this point that Simon began to catch a glimpse at who Jesus was. Luke will continue to grow this relationship between Simon Peter and Jesus as a model for discipleship and later, in the Book of Acts, for apostleship.

Luke 5:10 "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people."

What does that mean?

Do you think Simon Peter or anyone else knew what Jesus was talking about?

Wasn't Jesus a rabbi/teacher and not a "catcher"?

What would they use to catch people? A boat? A net? How did that work?

Given Peter's bluntness, would you have picked Peter as your lead salesperson?

What if we are simply the boat which Jesus uses to throw out the net of the Holy Spirit?

Commentary on 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

The lectionary skips over chapter 14 which deals with speaking in tongues versus prophecy and the role of women in worship. What was the proper form of worship and how where the gifts of the Holy Spirit to be used in the church were just some of the questions facing Paul. After addressing worship, Paul turns to the question of resurrection and his calling. There was some disagreement as to the nature of the resurrection. Paul begins his response by reminding the reader of Jesus' resurrection. The promise of the resurrection is not based on our merit but on the fact that "Christ died for our sins". The resurrection is the assurance that those sins are forgiven. Paul then goes on to mention that along with the disciples, over five hundred witnessed the resurrected Jesus thus eliminating any doubts to the validity of the resurrection. Paul defends his role as an apostle not simply based on Jesus appearance to "one untimely born" but more on the basis of the message he proclaims. The message for Paul is nothing more or less than Christ crucified and raised for the salvation of the world. This is the "good news" or the "evangelon" in Greek. Originally, an "evangelist" is simply one who proclaims the good news. The word "apostle" became reserved for only those who were personally "sent" by Jesus. For Paul, however, there is no difference since all have the same message given by the grace of God.

1 Corinthians 15:10 I worked harder than any of them-- though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

Have you ever gotten caught up in your work?

What makes work hard, the task or the motivation behind the task?

Has easy work ever felt hard because you just were not motivated?

Has hard work ever gone by fast because you were excited about what was being done?

What difference does grace make in the work we do for God?

If "doing good" feels like work than maybe it is because there is no grace?

Reflection on Isaiah 6:1-10, Luke 5:1-11, 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Sermon "Woe Am I"

At times it seems we live in a world of diminishing expectations. When a politician lies or an athlete is caught cheating, people are no longer surprised. Long marriages are the exception rather than the normal. As we expect less from others, we in turn expect less from ourselves. Like the scorpion in Aesop's fable when the frog asked why the scorpion stung him, the scorpion replied, "Because I'm a scorpion". Greed and corruption in large corporations appear to be the nature of the beast. They are after all scorpions. We no longer talk about sin because we are swimming in it. What a shock it is, therefore, when we encounter the pure goodness and love of God!

When Isaiah came face to face with the glory of God, he fell to his knees and proclaimed, "'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" When Peter witnessed the glory of God revealed in Jesus, he "fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!'" It is only in the light of God's glory that the depth of our sinfulness is revealed. Paul says in Romans 3, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God". Even Paul admits that "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me." (Romans 7:15-20)

If then we all fall short and lack the power to change, where does our help come from? Are we meant to live in a world of diminishing expectations where we race to the lowest common denominator? Can our governments or economic systems lift us out of this pit? Is it every person for themselves and those who fail simply are not trying hard enough?

For Paul, the answer is clear. "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain." It is only by God's grace that we can be more than we have become. This grace was symbolically offered to Isaiah in his vision when "one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.'" For Peter, it was when Jesus told him, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." And for Paul it was when Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus as "one untimely born". God's grace comes to us as a gift. Not earned or merited but as an expression of God's love for us. That expression of love took its truest form in the person of Jesus Christ who was crucified, buried, and risen so that all might be rescued from the pit of sin.

When God created, all of creation was called good including us. We were not created for sin and our own low expectations but we were made a little lower than the angels. All of creation groans until we live up to who we were created to be. Our low expectations made normal by sin has not only polluted our society and our relationships but the very world we live in. By faith in Jesus Christ, however, we have been given the gift of grace to become who God made us to be. We can leave the boats of mediocrity and proclaim the hope of we have found in Jesus. Our world will only change, if we change and we will only change by the grace of God. The good news is that we no longer have to live in a world of diminishing expectations. We were never meant to be scorpions. We were meant to be God's beloved children in the paradise of love God created. Accept God's gift of grace and go proclaim the good news of Jesus to a world stuck in darkness.