

The Greatest Threat to Christianity

LUKE 5:1-11 (NRSV) *Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, ²he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. ⁴When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." ⁵Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." ⁶When they had done*

this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. ⁷So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" ⁹For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; ¹⁰and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who are partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." ¹¹When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

The Lectionary texts continue to focus on the season of Epiphany, as we discover and celebrate the many manifestations of God's power and presence.

ISAIAH 6:1-8 (NRSV) *In the year that King Uzziah died (742 BCE), I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ²Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³And one*

called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." ⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips..."

Isaiah describes the Holy of Holies—the inner sanctum of the Temple. It's the Day of Atonement—Yom Kippur, the highest holy day of the Jewish Calendar. Isaiah likely was the High Priest that year, since the High Priest was the only one permitted to enter the Holy of Holies, and only on the Day of Atonement.

The people began preparation ten days earlier—a day called Rosh Hashanah—bathing, washing their clothes, making sacrifices, repenting. On the Day of Atonement, the High Priest bathed and, instead of his ornate priestly vestments, would wear only a pure white robe.

First, he sacrificed a young bull and a ram as a sin offering for himself and the other priests. Then he entered the Holy of Holies with a pan of glowing coals from the altar. The air was filled with smoke and the aroma of incense. On the top of the ark of the covenant he sprinkled blood from the sacrificed bull.

Lots were cast to choose which of two goats would be offered as a sin offering for the nation. The high priest would reenter the Holy of Holies and add its blood to the blood already sprinkled on the mercy seat.

With grand ceremony, he would then place his hands on the head of the other goat and confess the sins of the whole nation. Finally, an appointed person

would carry the goat outside the city and set it free into the wilderness. This "scapegoat" would carry away the sins of the people, never to return.

Great ceremony! High Church! But something unexpected happened when Isaiah entered the Holy of Holies, and what he saw changed his life forever.

Back in the 1980s I co-directed a Jr Hi church camp. The theme was worship, and we started off the week with a survey. We handed out 3X5 cards and asked the campers to respond to one question: "Name three things you expect when you go to worship." Several said they expected singing. Some expected prayers, Bible reading, sermons... The #1 response—by far? "I expect to be bored."

The last thing Isaiah expected was a face-to-face encounter with God! He fell to his knees, waiting to be struck dead, because in that presence, he felt totally unworthy. But God took away his guilt and said, "Who will go for us, and whom shall I send?" and Isaiah said, "Here am I. Send me." And he went on to become Israel's premier prophet—the one after whom Jesus modeled his own ministry.

In the reading from the Epistle, Paul is writing to the church in Corinth about the post resurrection appearances of Christ, and concludes:

I CORINTHIANS 15:8-10 (NRSV) *Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain.*

In the Gospel Kaye read, Peter is overwhelmed by the presence of Christ, and cries out: "Go away from me, Lord! I am a sinful man!" And Jesus responds, "From now on you will be catching people."

Paul Harvey once said, "Too many Christians are no longer fishers of men but keepers of the aquarium." On the day of Pentecost, it's Peter who delivers the first Christian Sermon, and becomes the premier voice of the Jerusalem church.

In each text, an experience of God's presence creates an overwhelming awareness of one's insignificance and unworthiness. But each text confirms an overall biblical theme that God encounters human beings, not to condemn and terrify, but rather to transform and call.

And here's the thing: in each text, the call is not to private spirituality but to declare God's word from within the community of faith; indeed, to call the community of faith itself to declare God's word to all people and every nation.

The story in Luke catches my attention because I love to fish. Anybody who's landed a big fish on a rod and reel salivates over this story. I doubt any of us can identify with it—so many fish the boat was sinking. The closest I ever came to that was in the 1970s during a district ministers' retreat.

The ministers in that district held quarterly retreats. A member of one

congregation owned a lodge on a lake where, on Thursday, we'd gather in time for dinner. There'd be a keynote speaker—someone from the regional or general staff, or a professor from Phillips Seminary—and from Thursday dinner through Saturday lunch we'd mix recreation with great food and fellowship and some solid growth experience. Some of my best memories as a minister are from those retreats.

There was a bass boat, and a nearby golf course, and most of us would arrive as early as possible on Thursday, some to play golf, and some to fish. One spring the crappie were biting, and four of us went out in the boat and caught over 80 crappie in less than two hours (I don't know what the limit was; but the statute of limitations long since has come and gone).

The boat wasn't sinking; but the live well was full, and I had a blister from cranking and hauling in slab crappie. It was great fun, but in my experience I'm more likely to identify with that part about fishing all night and catching nothing.

"...they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break." But here's what pulls it all together: *"So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink."*

In each text, the experience of God's presence is in a context of community or partnership. One of the greatest spiritual deceptions in our time—one of the greatest threats to Christianity—is the privatization of Spirituality and faith.

The great catch of fish is a common metaphor of evangelism. What's not often noticed is how the disciples bring in the fish. The haul is too large for Peter's boat. It takes his partners' boat to help the catch; and I note two truths:

First is the obvious example of group interdependence and cooperation.

The second is less obvious. As a bass fisherman, I read articles and blogs. I subscribe to magazines, and watch videos about fishing. I know seasonal patterns; I know how bass relate to light and to underwater structure and cover. But all that knowledge produces nothing—until I get in the boat and cast a line.

We cannot overstate the importance of the foundations of church identity—doctrine, sacrament, history, discipling, leadership and authority. But the church is not the church because of those elements; indeed, those elements more frequently have been the basis of division. The church is nothing—produces nothing—until it is unified around its work for the sake of the lost and the poor.

When that happens, the nets will be full, and today's reading from the Psalms will be applicable: after a lengthy chorus of praise, the Psalmist concludes: "The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me..." May it be so for us. Prayer Slide