

**5 Epiphany
February 6, 2022**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe filled the Temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings, with two they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."
(Isaiah 6:1-3)*

This is the call of Isaiah to his prophetic ministry through glorious theophany. We still hear its echoes in our service of Holy Eucharist 2,500 years after the seraphs uttered the words:

*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
The whole earth is full of his glory.*

I know this passage well. In my first year of seminary I was invited to my home church in Morehead City, North Carolina to preach a "Theological Education Sunday" sermon. This was the lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures assigned from that day. It was my first occasion to actually preach in a church ... and, although I was a first year student at Virginia Theological Seminary I was still unsure about my decision to pursue a career in the ordained ministry of the Episcopal Church.

This reading is Isaiah's reporting of his call to prophetic ministry. It fits with the Gospel story from Luke of Jesus calling fishermen to follow him. And just last week, we heard the story of Jeremiah's call to ministry. Of course there are other stories of being called in our Holy Scriptures: Abraham and the three angels ... Moses and the burning bush ... the prophet Ezekiel ... and the profound conversion experience of Paul ... in a blinding flash ... on the Road to Damascus. For many these are the models for what it means to be called by God to service: A clear hearing of God's voice ... or an angel's voice ... or the voice of Jesus. Each time, the one being called responds with reluctance. Each time, these are the words of assurance, "Do not be afraid." Then, in all these stories from our holy scriptures there is an unambiguous response ... essentially, "Here I am, send me."

However, for me it was different. My call to ordained ministry was a 3X5 index card posted on a bulletin board that said, "Wanted: Something to do for a year or for a lifetime." Although that 3X5 index card led me into an almost 50 year career in the ordained ministry, it did not begin with a clear and unambiguous commitment.

As a youngster my family had moved up and down the East Coast every few years to follow my father's career, and my church experience as a child was to attend whatever faith community was either geographically or social convenient for my parents. It was the Methodist Church across the street ... or around the corner. It was the Congregational Church where my father's boss attended ... or the Presbyterian Church where my girl friend belonged to the youth group.

And schooling was never consistent either: a couple of years in a highly acclaimed elementary school on Long Island, then into a classroom in a rural area south of Charlotte where two grades shared the same teacher. Two different schools in North Carolina ... a year in Princeton, New Jersey ... two years back on Long Island ... then the final two years of high school back in northern New Jersey.

We never lived in any one place more than three years, so, rather than learn I mostly coped. After high school I took the path of least resistance yet ended up attending four colleges in four years ... one in upstate New York, two in North Jersey, and one in North Carolina ... and I ended up being awarded a fellowship to grad school. Mathematics had always come easy to me, so I just followed where it led rather than make a real choice about what I wanted my life to be.

For several years I taught at a couple of state universities, and was working on completing my doctorate when the arc of my life changed dramatically. A teaching colleague, next door neighbor, and close friend committed suicide just hours after standing in my kitchen. The ground shook under my feet. I was forced to examine ... in a new light ... the values I was living by, and the choices I was making ... and the choices I was not making.

As fate would have it ... or maybe it the Holy Spirit? ... I ended up at Kanuga Conference Center in the mountains of North Carolina for a weeklong event. And it was on their bulletin board that I placed the 3X5 card: "Wanted: something to do, for a year or a lifetime."

There was no grand theophany like the one Isaiah experienced ... with God's booming voice and six-winged seraphs . There was no blinding flash like Paul's Damascus Road encounter with Jesus. There was only a willingness to be led by curiosity and a force I couldn't grasp ... and I was led into a place that confused my intellect, but soothed my spirit. I remember a class during my first week at seminary. I was seated between a retired admiral on one side, and a retired federal judge on the other ... and I was in hippie jeans, and a dashiki, and water buffalo hide sandals, and I had a full beard and my hair hung to my shoulders. I imagine they were as bewildered as I was. Yet, although my head was at times confused, my soul told me I was in the right place.

I believe we are all "called" by God all the time. Whatever that force is out there that we call God, that sacred energy wants us to live into the abundance of life for which we were made. Yet, when we hear these stories of the call of our spiritual ancestors in our holy scripture ... Abraham and Sarah ... Moses and Miriam... Samuel and his mother Elkanah ... Jeremiah ... Isaiah ... Jonah ... Mary, the mother of Jesus ... Joseph, the protector of Mary ... Simon, James, and John ... Paul ... when we hear these stories of grand theophanies, and booming voices, and

angels, and blinding flashes we dismiss our own callings. Most of us do not hear a voice, or see angels, yet somehow we know we are “called” ... it feels right for the soul.

And these stories of being “called” are about people who end up with profound ministries. Abraham and Sarah are the progenitors of our faith. Moses led his people out of slavery in Egypt. Samuel anoints David as King. Jonah preaches to the Ninevites and the whole city repents. Simon, James and John become the Disciples. And, Paul is the penultimate Apostle.

But what about the rest of us. Sure, some become ordained in the Church like me, Pastor Deena, Fr. Mal, Bishop Howard. But what about the rest of the “regular” people. The fact is, we are all called in one way or another. We are being called to be the person God made us to be ... not something else ... not someone else. And in our calling there is a place for all of us the greater community of faith.

However, most of the time, this scares us. Most of the time we are reluctant. Like Simon in today’s gospel reading, we feel unworthy ... totally inadequate ... for the role we are being asked to play. That is why we read these stories. Not because they evoke awe and wonderment about the power of God, but for the reassurance that God gives each of those God calls ... the assurance, “Do not be afraid.”

I preach from this pulpit every week and offer my thoughts on God’s holy Word. I stand at the altar and preside over a spiritual meal consecrated to God’s glory. I convene meetings, and promote ministries to share our gifts with those around us. I advocate for the poor, and those seeking justice, and the vulnerable people who are marginalized in our world. Yes, this is part of my calling.

Sometimes I feel that I do most of those things well ... and with a certain amount of confidence. Yet, there are times when I am thrust into a situation for which I don’t feel prepared, and I feel inadequate to respond. In most of those cases, I don’t have the option of ignoring the role into which I have been led to.

That is when I recall these stories. It is then that I am reminded of the words others have heard ... “Do not be afraid.”

In the story from Luke’s gospel this morning Jesus shows up at the shore of the Sea of Galilee where Simon, James, and John are mending their nets after fishing all night and catching nothing. Jesus uses one of the boats as a pulpit to teach the crowd.

Nothing is said about what he taught on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, but a couple of weeks ago we heard him say in Nazareth that God’s kingdom ... God’s reign ... will be like the Jubilee Year. Debts will be forgiven ... prisoners will be released ... the blind will see, and the deaf will hear.

Then, after teaching from the stern of the boat Jesus invited Simon to get back in, and go back out on the lake, and throw his nets out one more time. Simon, who had just spent the entire night throwing nets and catching nothing, somewhat hesitantly consents. And ... lo and behold ... the nets are overfilled with fish. It was a like a miracle.

Is that the point of this part of the story? That Jesus was a miracle worker and could impress people like Simon, and James, and John to the point that they just dropped their nets and left everything when Jesus said, "I will make you fish for people?"

Maybe it was a miracle. And, maybe Simon, and the sons of Zebedee were impressed. But for me, that the net was full of fish is about abundance. Abundance to meet every need. Abundance to meet fear with confidence. Abundance to know that even if you are immobilized ... feeling unworthy ... feeling inadequate ... you will be given all you need.

Simon certainly does not feel worthy ... "I am a sinful man." To that Jesus says, "Do not be afraid."

I believe that all of us are "called" in one way or another. If you think you are not called by God to some form of ministry in God's name then I don't think you are listening. If you have been waiting for a booming voice, or a blinding flash, you may still have a long wait in front of you. Yet, I think each of us is called every day in many little ways.

You may not be the one to stand at the altar ... and you may not even want to have that ministry ... but you can offer your faithful prayers. And, you can offer hospitality to the stranger, food to the hungry, shelter to the homeless, companionship to the lost and lonely ... and many other forms of caring love to those who need it most. The fact is that you have been called to live into the image of God ... the loving God of all creation. You are a beloved and blessed child of God ... and you have been called to share that blessing with those with whom we share this life.

These stories in our sacred texts often sound like something that happened only to very special people. Yes, they are very special people ... but they are very special people because they followed their call in spite of feeling less than worthy of being a vessel for God's loving abundance. Each of them were told, "Do not be afraid."

Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Samuel and his mother Elkanah, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Jonah, Simon, the sons of Zebedee, Paul ... were just regular people when they were called. The Bible is full of regular people who were called to be vessels of God's loving abundance ... and they were reluctant. They felt unworthy. They felt inadequate. But, they were told, "Do not be afraid."

That is as true for you as it was for any of them. We are constantly called to be a vessel of God's loving abundance. "Do not be afraid."

Live without fear.
Your Creator has made you holy,
has always protected you,
and loves you with a power and a presence
that is stronger than death.

Amen.