

Weekly Reading – Monday, February 1, 2010

The epiphanic experiences, revelations of God's presence and power, continue this week, for Isaiah in the temple, for Paul on the road, and for Peter while fishing. All are call stories, a great theme for this season of the church year. But "call" is more than a job or even, in a sense, a vocation. It is, first of all, an encounter with the Holy Other, which is what we all want and what we all don't want!

Isaiah 6: 1 - 8

A classic text, the call of Isaiah to be a prophet. Also a great complement to the gospel text of the call of Peter. Both respond to their encounter with the holy with a deep sense of their own sin. The interesting thing is that a sense of sin is not a disqualifier, but a qualifier. In other words, God doesn't call perfect people (there aren't any). God calls people who have some awareness of their own limitations, needs for grace, and contingency. This is a wonderful alternative to the American and human fantasy of the virtuous outsider/ hero who will fix it all for us. That fantasy puts people in the passive spectator role, whereas God's call of a sinful man says that God can use people like you and me, that it's not about our great virtue, but about God's great grace. Beyond that, this text is a classic portrayal of the experience of worship in four parts: entry into God's awesome and mysterious presence, awareness of sin and forgiveness, call, and response. Often today, I feel the church has lost this sense of entry into awesome mystery, of worship as special time and place. This isn't a contemporary/ traditional worship thing. It's more about the sense of the holy. I discourage ministers and students from beginning worship by saying, "Good morning," which loses the sense of the holy. How out of place a cheery "Good Morning" would be in this Isaiah text! Better to use words of Scripture or a liturgical greeting like, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of the God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

I Corinthians 15: 1 - 11

This is one of those rare weeks where all three of the texts really jive. Here we have one of the several times in the Pauline correspondence where Paul mentions his own call. He prefaces it, in verses 3 - 8, with what some view as a kind of precis of the gospel or a credo. One could debate that evaluation of these verses. Considered a summary of the gospel they seem a bit reductive. But as a prelude to Paul's narration of his call, they fit. "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared to me." Paul, like Isaiah and Peter, certainly has a sense of his own sinfulness, "For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." But Paul's unworthiness helps us to see that it is not about his virtue, but about God's grace. Again, as with Isaiah before and Peter next, call is not because we are in ourselves sufficient or qualified, but that by the grace of God we are qualified, called, and claimed.

Luke 5: 1 - 11

And now the third scene of this encounter with God/ called to service triptych: Peter called to be a disciple. What a great, what a powerful story! The scene is set as Jesus teaches at the

lakeside with a boat as his pulpit. When he's done teaching, he turns to a fisherman, Peter, ordering him to put out into "deep water." Simon Peter protests, "We have worked all night long but have caught nothing." How often do we mortals, we ministers, have that feeling, that lament? Worked hard with nothing, seemingly, to show for it. But Peter relents and does as Jesus instructed, when he does the nets are full of fish. That Peter responds not by saying, "How did you know where the fish were?" but by saying, "Go away from me Lord for I am a sinful man," tells us that the point is not the fish. The point is God, God's holiness, Christ's epiphany of God and the intrusion of grace. Peter asks Jesus to go away from him; Jesus tells Peter to follow him and "leaving everything they followed him." So here's a theme that emerges from this for me: surrender. Growing up "surrender" was a bad word, a bad idea. As I've grown older "surrender" has revealed another side. Surrender to God, letting go and letting God. Letting God be God for me. Often in our willfulness we refuse the wise suggestions of others. We know better. Here the suggestion/ command of Jesus, "Put out into deep water and shoot your nets to starboard," is (after a fishless night) a "stupid," "counterintuitive" suggestion like "When you're at the end of your rope, let go." Let God be God is equally counter-intuitive but also true.