

Calls and Responses

There are many call stories narrated in our scriptures—probably the simplest might have been that of Noah whom God told to build an ark to save himself, his family and the living creatures of the world from a flood the Lord said would come. Noah complied, and the world continued. The next possibility came with what is termed the call of Abram. Again—this was a simple command—“The Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.’” And Abram got up and went...and went and went...The call was answered but not in the way Abram thought it would be. And that is almost always the way of God’s calls. The first text we have before us this morning skips over a number of calls...that of Moses....Joshua....various Judges...and brings us to the time of the prophet Isaiah. Almost all of these call stories present a pattern where the Lord speaks, and a response is given. The response is never a simple yes, but includes an excuse which the Lord refutes in some manner. The text about this call happens in a time which is not a good time in the relationship of the people of God with their Lord. The first chapters of Isaiah are not about the call of the prophet, but about the words of judgment that the Lord has already begun giving Isaiah to proclaim---expressions of grief felt by God over the unfruitful vineyard, denunciations of social injustices precede the vision that Isaiah has of God in the temple which begins what is often termed Isaiah’s call. Isaiah is already in an established relationship with the Lord and responding to the call upon his life. Here Isaiah’s vision is of the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, attended by seraphs who say: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” Isaiah’s response is: “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 I was introducing the gospel passage from Luke, I gave a brief summary of the fourth chapter which fills is some background that Jesus has with Simon and these village fishermen from Capernaum. Just like Isaiah and those folks in Jerusalem to whom Isaiah has been bringing a word of judgment, Jesus has been getting to know these folks in Capernaum for a while. According to Luke, Jesus has been gaining a reputation among them so as this text begins, he is standing by the lakeshore there is a crowd is pressing in on him to hear what he is saying—to hear the word of God. As this passage begins in order to get a better picture of this scene in our minds we perhaps need to rearrange some of the information in the text a little bit. Fishing on the Sea of Galilee, which is really a large lake, is actually done from dusk until early light, not during the day. The boats are not small, but are rather large. From evidence archaeological evidence of a 2000 year old boat excavated a few years ago, the boats were probably were about 26 feet long by 7 feet long. The fishing was done by large seine nets thrown over the side, not by rod and reels. Then as the 15 or so men aboard rowed the boat, fish were gathered into the nets and then the nets were pulled in and the fish dumped into the boat. And to make it easier, the boats often fish together—in pairs. So Jesus is standing by the shore. It is early morning. The fishing is over for the night and the fishermen are in their boats in shallow water or along the shoreline cleaning their nets. In order to gain some space, Jesus gets into

one of these boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asks Simon to put out a little way from the shore. Then Jesus sits down and teaches the crowd from the boat. Despite the many details of this narrative, we are not given any hint of what Jesus taught. Earlier, Luke has told us that Jesus' teachings cause amazement among those who hear him. That people recognize that these teachings come with authority. Perhaps that explains what happens when Jesus finishes speaking. He turns to Simon, the man who fishes for a living and has just come in from a night spent fishing without success, and says to him, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." It was well known among those who fished for a living that to be successful the nets would need to be let down in deep water, not along the shore, so even though Jesus was not one who had ever fished for his living, it would not have surprised Simon that he requested this. However, Simon and his fellow fishermen had just spent the whole night on the lake fishing, so that he would answer as he does seems to indicate a response to that authority with which Jesus was seen to speak. "Simon answered, 'Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.'" Yes, Simon, calling Jesus Master, will do as he has been asked. In this presentation, I think that we can sense how Jesus calls more clearly than in the brief presentation of the other gospel narratives. It is through relationship. Simon knows Jesus. Simon is being "caught" by the love and spiritual authority of Jesus. This is so much so that he will act against what his better fishing senses tell him. He will go fishing again in the daylight after a totally unsuccessful night of fishing. Simon might have been doubtful that it will be a successful venture, but...he is willing to put out the nets. The passage continues: "When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. 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." If you remember the size of these boats, that would have been an enormous amount of fish...The implication which is most usually drawn from this story of call is about this catch and the size of it. It is about the amazing success and abundance of the number of fish captured in the nets. There is an immediate skipping to verse 9 to conclude the calling. "For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.'" When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him." The connection between call and following is real. There is also a reality that it is often not quite that simple. The key to this lack of simplicity for Simon is found in verse 8: "But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!'" Have you heard something very similar in response to God's call from scripture just this morning? Isaiah 6: 5 "And 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.'" In the interlude, the music which was played has two titles. In the Presbyterian Hymnal #525 the title is *Here I Am, Lord*. Other sources use the first line of the hymn, *I, the Lord of Sea and Sky*. The first title comes from the refrain and is drawn from the Isaiah passage where Isaiah's response is "Here am I, send me!" In both these passages, the call was answered in the positive after some self doubt. There is no doubt that we live in a broken world. Rev. Dr. Richard Boyce who taught me at Union and whom many of you know calls it not only broken but a broken busted world, but also a world where there can be glimpses of the kingdom—of the reign of God. That is

what the texts from 1st Corinthians which the lectionary placed before us these last few weeks were about. In them the Apostle Paul spoke of gifts of the Spirit which God has given to the body of Christ—especially the gift which the Apostle Paul calls the greatest given to all—the gift of love—which is a gift of active caring—that is what the texts about Jesus calling followers are about---that is the essence of discipleship. Many of us Christians are afraid of being evangelists, missionaries, and “going fishing” for Jesus Christ. We need to hear Jesus’ words to his first disciples in this context as well: “Do not be afraid.” The actual lectionary reading from Isaiah ended at verse 8, but I continued the reading because it describes the difficult situation that Isaiah was called into: “And he said, ‘Go and say to this people: ‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.’” In other words, Isaiah was given a true word to speak to a people who would not hear, but he was called to keep on speaking God’s word. When we hear God calling us, how do we respond? We have a message about a gift of love which the world needs to hear, even if it does not want to hear it, if it does not seem to be listening. When there are so many words of hate and distrust being shouted, we need to be speaking...not shouting, but softly and continuously speaking those of love. That is not always pleasant. That is not easy. But that is the call that is made upon us. And we need to remember that in the gospel message that we have to give love—despite the message spoken by the world—in its message of love and Valentine’s Day—love in the Biblical sense is not about feeling but about action—it is about doing. To speak the message that God so loved the world is the message that God acted-- that God came and dwelt among us for all of us. That I mentioned hymn’s refrain reflects that: “Here I am Lord, Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart.” And that says it all. God holds us in God’s heart, and asks us to do the same for God’s world and God’s people. God calls us to go, but God goes with us. God calls us to go, but God goes with us. Thanks be to God.