

Hearing Calls

In the readings from scripture this morning we have two very clear stories about people from those long ago times whose lives were uprooted and transformed by encounters with the divine. These are narrated as “call stories”, the accounting of when and how these people experienced God placing a “call” on their lives; the narration of this event marks the total change in their lives...they are never the same afterward. Many of the people who I came to know in seminary had their own clear cut “call” story, some event in their life which meant that afterwards nothing was the same. Yet these same people often expressed the wish that their call could have been as clear cut as those we have in our scriptures; often musing that it would have been nice if there was a “burning bush” present within their story which gave them a very definitive path to follow. More often than not their stories resembled the one I got which led me to seminary...more a sense that God has a purpose for me, but not a clear path for where following this feeling would lead. I certainly had no idea that I would seek ordination or even if I did, that the call would then lead me to stand in a pulpit. It seemed reasonable to me that the experiences of my life would lead me to being a better teacher of Bible study or perhaps serving in a pastoral care function to visit with those needing “caretaking” to get them through difficult times. My aversion to speaking in front of groups certainly did not seem to make being someone proclaiming a weekly message to a congregation likely to be the correct path. Yet obviously that is where my “call” has led me. Within the Reformed tradition it is always interesting to think about “call” stories, as we believe we are all called; that we each have been called as disciples into Christ’s service. Examining the two texts for this morning, they have some similarities but also some clear differences. Isaiah begins his first person account of the call he received by stating that he has a vision where he sees the Lord sitting on a throne. As the text continues it becomes clear that even in this vision, Isaiah sees only the hem of God’s robe, not God’s face. Even so, this vision of God’s majesty and glory described by the presence of the seraphs who are singing what is a familiar hymn to us: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” This vision causes Isaiah to exclaim, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lip, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet I have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” The Hebrew word translated as “lost” in this passage actually has three meanings. It is not clear which one is correct here. The word can mean “to be destroyed” which fits with the statement about unclean lips and fear because he has seen the Lord. It can also mean “to be brought to silence” or to be “made in the likeness of God.” Encountering God in this vision could mean that Isaiah is stunned into silence...or it might be a reminder than even when unclean we are still made in God’s image. It is interesting that the word for unclean in this passage does not refer to sin or to being disobedient to God’s commandments. Instead it is the term for ritual uncleanliness—the term indicates that Isaiah had not properly prepared for this encounter with the divine. This text clearly shows that God does not wait for us to “get clean” before appearing in our lives. What happens next in the Isaiah text is the “cleaning of Isaiah’s lips” by the application of a burning coal. Isaiah is then told this touch has blotted out his sin, his guilt has departed. This forms a metaphor for the forgiveness which is granted at God’s throne each and every time we come before our Lord, confessing our need for the forgiveness and mercy found at the throne of God. We tend to take this granting of forgiveness

as something that is ordinary; but it is not, and only God, the Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer who rules over all can give us this gracious gift. The text reminds us that coming into the unmediated presence of the Lord is not something to seek, for it can yield terror and death. No matter how much we take God's forgiveness for granted, the Lord is God. Isaiah is not. We are not. In any such encounter there is danger. This action of cleaning his lips makes way for the voice of God to be heard by Isaiah; what Isaiah hears is a question which asks, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" It is not clear whom God is addressing; perhaps some of the heavenly beings present around the throne? Yet Isaiah's response indicates he immediately wants to volunteer—doesn't ask where he will need to go or what he will be called upon to do. He just responds: "Here am I; send me." The passage for today ends with that eager answer to go and serve. The remaining portion of the text describes what the task will entail. He will go and speak God's message to those people of unclean lips among whom he lived. Their listening will not bring comprehension; they will not turn back to the Lord and God's ways. God tells the prophet to proclaim the message despite the peoples' unwillingness to hear it. When Isaiah asks "How long, O Lord." The answer is not encouraging as it describes the ruin of Jerusalem and the exile to come, but says the proclamations must continue past that. Isaiah is called to proclaim the message even in the face of apathy and opposition. Isaiah is called, as are we, to ministry, to integrity, to endurance, to trust in God despite an unfavorable response. We are called to faithfulness, not measurable success. Trust in the power and promise of God. We are in the season of Epiphany which is about the manifestation of God among us. Epiphany reminds us that God has made himself visible and audible and tangible, but people still have not always responded in faith. We declare along with the seraphs that the earth is full of God's glory, but often we don't seem to see it. We must somehow reach the point that Isaiah did when he beheld God's hem overflowing from the Temple Holy of Holies, with the realization that we are not prepared to have an encounter with God; that we are indeed people of unclean lips and ways living among those like us. Yet when we realize this, we can also realize that we are not lost at all, but in the presence of our Lord who desires to redeem us and give us a life that is life indeed. When we turn to the gospel text, we encounter not God in the Temple but God with us—Emmanuel. God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth has left that village and gone to the village of Capernaum, a fishing village on the coast of the Sea of Galilee. This passage does not tell us how long Jesus has been living among them but several things have happened since he arrived. He has taught in their synagogue and then gone home with Simon; to Simon's mother-in-law's home where he has healed her and many others who have been brought there. He has even cast out an unclean spirit on the Sabbath. Luke records that people were amazed at what he taught, for it was taught with authority. The passage begins with this background as Jesus is standing beside the shore but is so pressed by the crowds wanting to hear proclaim the word of God that he commandeers one of two boats that are on the shore. The boats belong to the village fishermen who have been out fishing with their nets all night. They did not have a successful night, but are now washing their nets. The boat he gets in belongs to Simon, and Jesus requests that he move it a little bit away from the shore. Although Luke does not give us the content or the length of time Jesus spent in the shallow waters so the people in the crowd could hear him, Luke tells us they were there to hear the word of God. When Jesus finishes his teaching, he then tells Simon he wants him to take the boat out into the deep water and put out the nets. Simon addresses Jesus as Master, a term as it is used in the Greek which means

teacher. Simon's response is that he and his fellow fishermen have already spent the whole night fishing without any success, yet Simon says that since Jesus has asked this, they will do as requested. The others who are with Simon are not named in this passage from Luke. Mark and Matthew will include Andrew, Simon's brother as well as two others called essentially at the same time, James and John, the sons of Zebedee who are named as Simon's partners in the fishing trade. In all of the synoptic accounts, this putting in of the nets brings in a miraculous catch—especially so since daylight is not a good time to be expecting any fish to be caught at all. The catch from Simon's boat is so great they have to have their partners come and help. In fact the catch is so large the boats are filled and the catch is so heavy the boats begin to sink. Simon, reacts dramatically as he will continue to do even after given the additional name of Peter, by falling at Jesus' knees and saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Simon now calls Jesus Lord instead of Teacher, seeming to recognize his divinity and holiness which resulted in their catch. Jesus responds by telling Simon not to be afraid, that from that time on his will be a different occupation—he will be catching people. Like Isaiah at his call, Simon's first reaction was a sense of being unworthy. As with Isaiah, once the divine issues the call, the response is to go where led. Jesus is beginning his work—the proclaiming of the nearness of God's reign and the creation of a community—a community of disciples who will hear him preach and teach, heal and restore people into their community—and who will later continue his work of preaching and teaching, of healing and restoring people into community. This is the purpose for which the church was created—Jesus had come into the world to reveal God and to redeem the cosmos. He is known to the world through the witness of those he calls. The story of the church is reflected in some degree within this call story. When Jesus calls Peter, he is hesitant and thinks that what Jesus asks of him is both unnecessary and too demanding. Nevertheless Simon responds and discovers that life has a surprise in store for him. By doing what Jesus asks him to do, he experiences an epiphany, a manifestation of God's presence. Often God becomes manifest in the ordinary, event seemingly unnecessary events in a person's life. Throughout history the church has continued to exist and carry on its ministry in spite of the tenuous responses of its members or those to whom the message of God's love is proclaimed. Like the people spoken of in Isaiah, there are those who hear but do not comprehend. That does not mean that those who are called can stop being Christ's witnesses. Jesus spoke with authority. If we speak and act out the teachings which Jesus gave us, we too can speak with authority. However, we must be sure that our unclean lips do not change the true message of God's love for us all; God's call for us to all live together in community caring for one another. These first disciples were in the fishing business; with their own boats they would be similar to our own middle class. They had no particular religious credentials to commend them to Jesus. Instead, they were typical representatives of the broken old age—living under Roman oppression, beset by forms of social conflict and economic distress. This call comes in the midst of these fishermen learning about Jesus' teaching and witnessing the acts of God. Our call to discipleship and ministry also must come in the context of listening and comprehending Jesus' teachings and then following where he leads with acts of love and care which will bring healing and restoration of community. We must learn to listen carefully so God's voice is heard over the noise of our world. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.