



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., Rector

Deeper Waters

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 6, 2022

The Fifth Sunday After Epiphany

Based on Isaiah 6:1-8, [9-13]; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen

In the year that King Uzziah died—or in the year when Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret or in the year when The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated or in the year when the World Trade Center towers were collapsed into piles of unspeakable loss—in the year of *any* memorable event, God is always calling.

“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And God continues to call, in the uniquely persistent manner of the Most Holy, over and over and over again. Too often when we think of “call,” we think about the ordained clergy. Yet only a very few people are called to respond to God’s invitation by being ordained. We are all empowered for ministry by our baptism, and the Sacrament of Baptism contains all the authority most of us will ever need to be effective Christian ministers in the world. Still, God is, irrefutably, engaging us, beckoning us, inviting us to serve. “Who? Who will go? Whom shall I send?”

Of course, we can try to avoid it or ignore it. But make no mistake: from the beginning of the creation God has been calling God’s creatures to be bearers of God’s love and grace. Some of the time, unfortunately, we simply don’t have “ears to hear.” Some of the time we actually say, “No. Absolutely not. No way. I am NOT interested. I will not go.” In other moments, we respond in half-hearted fashion, “Well, maybe I *could* go. *Theoretically* it might be possible. I mean it certainly wouldn’t be my first choice, of course, but I guess I *could* go.”

And then there are the times when we simply say, “Yes.” We go for God. It is a mystery, really, why we say “yes.” There is no real explaining it. Sometimes we know we have to say “yes” or we will feel as though we will explode! There is just a moment when we *know* we have to go, because we can no longer stay. In other times, it is more like some deeper, ancient voice summoning us. It might be interesting to invite you to think for a moment about a time when you responded “No” to God’s call and a time when you responded “Yes.”

This morning we’ve heard two stories about God’s call to people to do holy work. The first, from the Book of Isaiah, is the story of the call of Isaiah. The second, from the Gospel According to Luke, is the familiar story of Jesus and his call to Simon Peter and his fellow fishermen.

The prophet Isaiah proclaimed his message to Judah and Jerusalem during a critical period when the people of Judah lived uneasily under a foreign ruler. The first nine chapters of Isaiah are basically his memoirs, and in the sixth chapter we heard this morning, he offers a compelling narrative of his call from God.

God's appearance is described in the setting of the Jerusalem temple, and God's question to Isaiah—"Whom shall I send and who will go for me?"—is a question we are still answering some 2,800 years later. There is something undeniably compelling about a person who responds to a radical call with a radical obedience. There is something undeniably compelling about a person who genuinely believes that refusing God would have a profound implication upon his or her life and upon the lives of the people for which he or she is responsible.

The Gospel According to Luke focuses again and again on Christ's compassion for the outcast, and Luke's gospel presents Jesus as the culmination of God's promise to the Hebrews. And whether you prefer to call it "The Sea of Galilee" or "The Sea of Tiberias" or "The Lake of Gennesaret," it's still the same: a beautiful place, a body of water about thirteen miles long and eight miles wide, where we find Jesus preaching to a large crowd standing on the shoreline. It's one of the places where pilgrims to the Holy Land can imagine the geography just as it was in the time of Jesus, because it hasn't changed all that much. And, using the shore as a natural amphitheater, Jesus sits down in the boat and begins to teach the gathering crowds, his voice echoing off the shoreline.

When Jesus finishes speaking, he tells the veteran fisherman, Simon Peter, to "head for deeper waters" and "to prepare to let down your nets." And a weary Simon Peter responds, "Master we've worked all night long and have caught nothing. Yet, if you say so, I will let down the nets."

The night was over. The heat of the day was upon them. The expert knew this was no time to be fishing. What Simon Peter might have said *under his breath* could have been more like, "This crazy Rabbi! If some carpenter's son from Nazareth knows more about fishing than I do, well then, THAT will be the day!" But as we all know, the catch was so huge that it nearly broke the nets of one of the fishing boats; and when another boat comes to assist, both boats nearly sink beneath the weight of all the fish which have been caught.

Now there are lots of responses to an event which falls completely outside our understanding of how the natural world works. Skepticism. Disbelief. Amazement. But when Simon Peter witnesses this miraculous proof of the Messianic qualities of Jesus, he doesn't say,

- "Surely this man is the Son of God!"
- or, "Thank you, O great worker of wonders!"
- or, "That was the most amazing thing I have ever seen!!!"
- He doesn't even ask, "How in the world did you do that!?!"

Rather, he falls down at Jesus' knees saying, "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man."

I find Peter's response so interesting and oh-so-very-human. "Go away. I am not worthy. Go away. This frightens me. Go away. Being in your presence is going to change me. Go away, because what I just saw changes how I understand the world, and I'm not really prepared to have my world turned upside down."

Like Simon Peter, we fear our sins and our unworthiness almost as much as our despair. Isaiah felt the same way when he felt he had to confess, "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!"

Isaiah thought he was about to be destroyed. In fact, we even fear God's *forgiveness* of our sins because we don't precisely know who will we be when we are not weighed down by our guilt. How can anyone possibly respond to such a love? And, what, what in God's name, might be asked of us in return?

On a bookshelf in my office is a medallion carried by Air Force Rescue personnel. The medallion in my office was carried by Airman Specialist 1st class John Michael Teal, who flew with a helicopter rescue team over Afghanistan during our long engagement in that country.

Mike grew up as a member of Saint Michael and All Angels Church in Dallas, Texas, where I served as a priest. His mother brought him to church every Sunday, and he was an acolyte and a crucifer and sang for years in the youth choir. He left Saint Michael's to attend college, and soon after graduation, he joined the Air Force and became part of an elite rescue squadron. At the Christmas Eve service, he came to the communion rail with his fiancé kneeling next to him. He was wearing his crisp blue uniform with a row of medals and ribbons running across his chest, and, as I gave him Communion, I remember whispering a prayer for his safety.

When he returned to Afghanistan, Mike's helicopter crew was off-duty when they received a call from a military hospital saying a young child was in critical condition and needed to be airlifted to the hospital for emergency surgery. The weather was marginal for flying, and the team had already put in a long day; but witnesses said not one member of the flight crew hesitated as they ran to their chopper and turned over the engines. They flew into the teeth of a fierce storm to pick up the endangered child, and, as they were making their way back to the hospital, they crashed into the side of a mountain. There were no survivors.

There's an inscription on the medallion which reads, "These things we do, that others may live." And below the medallion is a bright gold star given to the relatives of servicemen who have given their lives in the service of our country. Mike's mother gave these to me after I conducted his funeral, and I cherish them to this day.

Because Mike was someone who said "yes." He said "yes" to helping others. He said "yes" to the risk. And I like to think of all the other saints who have put higher ideals before their own lives, very human people who responded to God in very holy ways. Is it too dramatic to say that all Christians are called to serve in such a selfless way?

When a person is dying and the friends who used to come around offering their cheery banter become scarcer, this is where we are called to be. When a person is throwing away their life with both hands, and friends and family members begin to give up hope, this is where we are called to be. When there is injustice and great harm being done and society seems encased in a polite silence, this is where we are called to be. To break the silence and speak the hard and prophetic truths.

"These things we do, that others may live." Oh yes, these are the deeper waters. We're out of the shallow end of the pool now. These are the deeper waters, where there is both danger and salvation and where we are called to overcome our fears.

The United States Coast Guard has an old saying about this kind of self-sacrificial service. They say, "You've got to go out... but you don't have to come back." You must respond to the need. There are no guarantees regarding your safety.

Bishop William Swing, former Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of California, said in the ordaining sermon when I was ordained:

I've been part of lots of reforming of the Christian Church, and I'm here to say, it's not easy. It won't be easy for you as you minister in a swiftly changing world. In the past, the impact of the Church's embrace of Black civil rights cost us more members than any crisis since the Revolutionary War. The impact of our church receiving gay and lesbian members as full members with access to ordination cost us dearly. It's not a matter of trying to be progressive, or liberal, or avant-garde; it's a matter of realizing that the Church must always be reformed.

All religions need to be reformed. Not only Episcopalians. Cries come from all over the Muslim world for reform. Cries come from our dear Roman Catholic brothers and sisters for reform. Judaism has a controversy over who exactly is a Jew. A radical Hinduism that burns mosques, persecutes Christians, and has its fingers on atomic buttons needs to be reformed. There is nothing wrong with facing reform. What is wrong is running away from it. Genuine faith requires a supple, elastic heart. Hardening of the arteries brings death, even to faith. Reform keeps the blood flowing.

The challenges to which we are called may appear too big: "To "Transform Lives. Transform the Church. Transform the World." But if it's miracles we seek, if it's the Living God to whom we pray, then we must take Jesus at his word when he bids us come. I love that Jesus tells Simon Peter to, "Go deeper. Go deeper." Because isn't everything of value finally found in the depths?

Amen.

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