

Epiphany 5 C 2022

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

February 6, 2022

Luke 5:1-11; Isaiah 6:1-13

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

The apostle Peter is famous for his declaration, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” January 18 is a feast day for the Christian church based on Peter’s confession. In today’s gospel, we hear these very different words from Peter: “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”

This is a detail that is unique to Luke’s gospel. The Christian imagination expects this to be a story about Jesus calling the fishermen to be his followers. The gospel acclamation verse that Eric Holtan chanted right before we read from Luke’s gospel said, “*Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.*” That’s what our memory, and our imagination, want to hear: An invitation to follow Jesus. But those words that Eric chanted were imported from Matthew’s gospel, because they don’t actually occur in Luke’s gospel, which is the one we are reading from. In other words, Luke is not telling us the Matthew and Mark version of this story that we know so well, a story in which Jesus calls, and the fishermen follow. In this version, Jesus works a miracle, and the stunned fishermen don’t know what to do. The verbs amaze and fear are used. But Peter’s initial response is the exact opposite of following Jesus. “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” Go away, Lord. Go away.

A similar thing happens in our first reading today. Isaiah says, “*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!*” Woe is me. That phrase is from the Old Testament. Isaiah’s actual word in Hebrew is *oy*. If you know the Yiddish expression, *oy vey*, that’s the Yiddish version of the Hebrew. “Woe is me. I am lost.” Together, today’s story of Peter and today’s story of Isaiah remind us that there is something fearsome in God. Something amazing, something awe-inspiring. Something scary. And the word that means all those things is “holy.” “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts” declare the seraphim. The seraphim do not look like Cupid. The paleontologists tell us that birds are related to Tyrannosaurus Rex. These seraphim with six wings are some kind of monster bird that still await Steven Spielberg’s cinematography.

The pairing of this passage from Isaiah with the passage about Peter and the fishing nets remind us that God is holy, and that we can never be too at ease with holiness. We should not be too familiar with God in some situations. The Isaiah story truly portrays the kind of distance—physical and spiritual distance—that separates us from the Almighty. The hem of God’s robe fills the temple. There’s a sense of God being gigantic, and just the bottom hem of his garment fills a

large space. The dinosaur bird monsters cover their own faces, because they are unwilling or afraid to look directly at God. There's an earthquake and there is smoke filling up the temple. *"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!"* There is a sense of this throughout the Old Testament. Moses has to cover his head because just the reflection of God's glory on Moses' head would blind the average Israelite. The ark of the covenant— which Steven Spielberg did manage to get into one of his movies— will destroy anyone who touches it. Holiness is dangerous. Holiness demands respect.

Then one of the seraphim monsters obtains a coal from the altar, and he touches Isaiah's mouth with the hot coal. This isn't to hurt him. Heat can be used to cauterize a wound. Heat can be used to sanitize a knife. And here are the words of the seraphic dinosaur bird: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Great Christian theologians have seen this as similar to what we Christians call sacraments. It's a physical ritual that reconciles Isaiah to God. Like baptism, or like communion. God uses an earthly element— fire— to erase guilt and sin. So there is a distance between God and Isaiah that God overcomes.

In the gospel reading, Jesus says the words that angels often say to terrified people: *Do not be afraid.* And then Jesus declares that they will be catching people, not fish. So there is the fear and dread that Simon Peter expresses. But Jesus overcomes it. And he doesn't really summon them, or recruit them, or invite them. He tells them. So in both stories, there is an understandable fear. And then the divine being overcomes that fear. The Lord of hosts and his seraphim in the one case, Jesus in the other case.

When I visited England in 1994, I was enchanted— as many Americans are— by the recorded voice on the Underground subway system. When the doors open on the subway, a recorded voice says, "Mind the gap." This is a famous thing, if you've never been to London. "Mind the gap." It has its own Wikipedia page. When you step from the platform onto the train, there is a possibility that you will trip, or even get your ankle caught between the train and the platform. There's a gap. But whereas Americans would say "watch out" or "be careful" or something, the British use the verb "mind." Pay attention, be mindful. "Mind the gap." A very British and enchanting way to promote safety.

Well, with God, sometimes we do well to "mind the gap." The good news of Jesus Christ is so much about deliverance, and so much about good cheer. Sometimes Jesus seems like a big golden retriever. Or a big Saint Bernard, coming to our rescue in the snow. We celebrate the gracious love of God in Jesus with such joy and exuberance that it's possible to forget that there is a gap. A gap which God overcomes. In fact, that's what his grace means. There is a gap between us, but he overcomes it. And while that is good news for us, it does not diminish his greatness, and it certainly does not diminish his holiness. To be aware of God necessarily means to be aware of one's own unworthiness. If that's true for Isaiah, and if that's true for Peter, it certainly should be true for us.

I believe we have a tendency to ignore the gap. That's partly because we have a tendency to see God and Jesus as instrumental. In both Isaiah's case and in Peter's case, they are being summoned to serve God. But it's easy for us to imagine God and to treat God as an instrument who provides us with peace, joy, happiness, and eternal life. He does provide those things. But he's still God. He does not exist for our delight. We exist for his delight.

So we have a tendency— I daresay a sinful tendency— to acknowledge God. But to treat him as an accessory to our lives, and not foundational for our lives. And if that's where we are, then woe is us. We can also think that by possessing a doctrine, a doctrine of the Trinity or a doctrine of justification or a doctrine of anything that domesticates God, that wraps him up for us in a package that we can understand. But the first meaning of "holy" is that it is apart from us, apart from our habitual daily life, and not within our mental or physical grasp. Doctrine is a teaching about God. But it does not replace God. And those of us who like theology and like philosophy and like ideas— we have a tendency to let our theology replace the God that is the goal of our theology.

The apostle Peter is famous for his declaration, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." But today we've heard Peter say something different, and something that I think is something we need to hear perhaps even more urgently than his confession. "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Oy vey. Woe is me. God is holy. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. [Psalm 111:10a] Mind the gap. Amen.