

C Lectionary 5 2.10.19

Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11

Focus Statement: God has already solved that obstacle.

My senior year of college, like you do as a college senior, I was trying to figure out what I was going to do with the rest of my life. During winter break, I went on a seven day retreat based on the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius. Gonzaga is a Jesuit school and St. Ignatius was the founder of the Jesuit order, so this was like a thing we did. As part of the retreat, each day we were supposed to spend 45 minutes visualizing ourselves in a bible story. We were supposed to bring up the sights, the sounds, the smells of the text, to bring the scene to life in our minds and let it speak to us. A thing I learned during that retreat was visualizing scripture is not a good spiritual discipline for me, but I digress. So, one day the text was Jesus and the rich young ruler, a story we'll hear over the summer, and for the first time I was really doing well at this whole visualization thing. I could feel the heat of the Judean sun on my shoulders, the rough hewn cloth of my robes, smell the dust in the air. I could see Jesus in front of me, and the rich young ruler coming up to him, to kneel at his feet and ask, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life."

I have to admit, I was getting a little proud of myself with how well this was going, when suddenly Jesus turned around, stared right at me, and said, "what are you afraid of?" And I thought, wait a minute, this is my visualization. I have created this scene in my head, this is not what happens in the story, this isn't how this is supposed to go. And I fought to regain the scene I'd been playing out, to go back to the role of observer, to return the Jesus I had created in my mind back to the young man kneeling in the dust. But the harder I tried, the more the image blurred, and again the voice asked, "what are you afraid of?" My mind

started listing off all the reasons why I didn't think I should be a pastor. Big, legitimate fears, like I wouldn't know what to say in a sermon every Sunday, I'm pretty introverted, and silly fears too, like I don't like to read out loud and, sorry Travis but, "the Rev. and Mr." looks funny on an address label. So this list grew and grew until again the voice, and it was just a voice by this time, I'd lost all control of the image, said one more time, "what are you afraid of?" "I don't know," I replied. And with that, the visualization was over. I opened my eyes to find myself back where I'd started, sitting on the floor of a small chapel at a Catholic retreat center, a little stiff, a little cold, and unsure what to do with the next fifteen minutes I was supposed to be visualizing, because clearly this was over for me at this point.

A lot of the stories we've been hearing from the lectionary this Epiphany season are call stories. Last week we heard God calling Jeremiah, this week it was God calling Isaiah and Jesus calling his first disciples. One of the things I love about call stories in the Bible, and especially the prophets' call stories, is they always have an excuse for why God is calling the wrong person. Last week, Jeremiah said, "I'm only a boy." This week, Isaiah said, "I am a man of unclean lips." Amos protested he was just a farmer, Moses said he was bad at public speaking, Jonah was like, "I don't even like the good news. You're a gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and I find that annoying." These guys were not jumping at the bit to this work. Even Simon Peter this morning was first like, "we've been fishing all day, and what's that phrase, stupidity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result, but sure, one more time, on the other side of the boat, because that's where the fish are hiding." And then, when it turned out the fish WERE on the other side of the boat, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

The reason I love these call story protests is that God always has an answer for the concern. And like so many anxiety-ridden fears, the answer is way easier than it seems like it should be. To Jeremiah, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy,’ for you shall go to all whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you... for I am with you to deliver you.” To Isaiah, “You say you have unclean lips? Here, here’s a live coal, now you’re good.” To Moses, God gave Aaron, who was good at speaking. To Jonah, God basically just dogged him until he gave in. And to Simon Peter, just “do not be afraid,” this morning’s fish debacle notwithstanding you seem to be pretty good at fishing so guess what, “from now on you will be catching people.” I relate to the prophets, because like my own experience they had created this insurmountable obstacle in their minds to whatever God was calling them to do. This problem so big, so hard, so entrenched, that there would be no way to solve it. But God, with the perspective of being the divine, could see the path forward, the in many cases very simple solution that was out of the prophets’ limited human perspective, and lead them into this new future.

Those obstacles in our path, those things that keep us from God, keep us from living the life God wants for us, God calls us to, the theological name for those obstacles is sin. Now keep an open mind here, because we’re Lutheran so when I say the word sin, your brain is automatically going to fill in the word “forgiveness.” Remember a couple weeks ago I talked about co-location, where you hear one word and your brain immediately fills in the corresponding next word? This is that. In our Lutheran tradition, sin and forgiveness is one of those paired concepts. But theologian Rolf Jacobson talks about how, while true,

that can be a limiting concept. Because sin is not only the things that we do, or don't do, for which we need forgiveness, it's bigger than that. The theological definition of sin is "that which separates us from God." Let me say that again, sin is whatever separates us from God. Sometimes, yes, those things are our behaviors, our actions, even our thoughts, things that we do, that we have control over, for which we feel guilty or ashamed or embarrassed. But sin, that which separates us from God, are not always things that are under our control. Loneliness, depression, fear, anxiety, worries about security or safety, struggles with our health or well-being, all of these things can separate us from God. But none of these things are things we did, they are things that happened to us, things that are a part of the human condition, a side effect of being alive in a world that is still not yet. So forgiveness isn't the solution to these sorts of brokenness. Think about it, if someone came up to you and said, you know, I'm feeling really lonely, or I'm scared, or I'm sad, you wouldn't say to them, "it's ok, I forgive you." That would be kind of a jerk response. Similarly, when Simon said to Jesus, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Jesus' response to Simon was not forgiveness, it was a call to relationship. Now that's not to say that Simon hadn't done things that might have needed forgiving, or that Simon would never need forgiveness. Simon, you may not have caught, eventually gets renamed Peter, and he's going to make all sorts of mistakes. But this first call, this first mending that which separated Simon from God, was not mending a bridge Simon had broken, it was building a new one where none had existed before.

In a few minutes we're going to get to celebrate the baptism of Angeline. And one of the things I love about the fact that our tradition baptizes infants is that it reminds us that

baptism, while about forgiveness, is about way more than that. Because Angeline really doesn't have anything she particularly needs forgiveness for at this point. Not because Angeline is some paradigm of perfect human behavior, but because her options are limited. She's a baby. It's hard to get into a lot of trouble when you can't actually go anywhere. And yes, she cries and is fussy sometimes, and I'm sure Mark and Leah wouldn't mind a bit more sleep, but all told, those are parts of being a baby, not anything Angeline is doing wrong. So if baptism is only about wiping away sin and giving us a fresh, forgiven, new start, then we should wait until Angeline is older and has actually had some time to cause some trouble before we baptize her. In fact, we should have waited on all of us. Baptism should be a funeral rite. But it's not. In our Lutheran tradition, the funeral liturgy is the fulfillment of the promises made at a person's baptism, promises that have been true throughout the person's whole life.

So what is happening at Angeline's baptism this morning, if it's not forgiving her for all the things she's done wrong? It gets back to that theological definition of sin that I shared earlier, sin is that which separates us from God. What's happening at Angeline's baptism is that God is closing that separation. God is declaring that nothing can ever, will ever, separate Angeline from God. Forgiveness is a part of it, yes, and a big part of it, but it's not all of it. What God promises at baptism is that nothing Angeline does, nothing Angeline feels, nothing that happens to her, can ever separate her from God. It is the assurance of forgiveness for mistakes she will inevitably make, and it is also this conviction of presence. That when Angeline feels alone she will not be alone. That when Angeline feels scared, she has someone to lean on, that when she is hurt, God will be there to comfort her. The

promise God makes to us in these waters is that we are forgiven, yes. But it is a whole lot more than that. Thanks be to God, who will never, who can never, be separated from us.

Amen.