

Fifth Weekend After Epiphany (RCL/C): "Life and the Lord: Full of Surprises"

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

February 8-9, 2025

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

If you search for "the most unlikely people God calls in the Bible" to do God's work and to serve God's people, the list is startling. Linked-In profiles would never have matched God's needs and these people's credentials. In Hebrew Scripture:

- Jacob, father of the 12 tribes of Israel, **stole** his brother Esau's birthright.
- Moses, called by God to tell Pharaoh, "Let My people go!", had **murdered** an Egyptian overseer and also suffered some kind of speech impediment – who would choose **him** as a spokesperson??
- God chooses the **shepherd-boy** David to be anointed the next **king** of Israel. Once David becomes king he abuses his royal power, taking Bathsheba (the wife of one of his generals, Uriah) and orchestrating that man's death on the battlefield. Despite this, David is described as "a man after God's own heart."
- Gideon, whom we find in the Book of Judges, is hiding from the enemy, cowering in a wine press, when God sends an angel to recruit him as head of the Israelite army.

In Christian Scripture:

- Jesus chooses Matthew, a hated **tax collector**, viewed as a **traitor** to his own people, a **toady** to the Romans, and a **thief**, as one of the 12 apostles.
- Jesus chooses Simon, a **Zealot**, a member of the armed, violent, murderous Jewish Resistance against Rome, as another one of the 12.
- Jesus chooses Simon Peter, whose bravado outpaces his bravery, whose mouth often runs quicker than his brain, to be the leader of the 12.
- Jesus chooses Saul, a **fanatic persecutor** of any Jew who believed Jesus to be the Messiah, as the original missionary to the Gentiles and the one whose letters to fledgling Christian communities of faith would come down to us as Holy Scripture.

And, of course, in today's Gospel Jesus plucks 4 fishermen from their boats, not 4 Talmudic scholars from desks in their shul to be the core of His little band of disciples.

Have you ever looked back and thought, "I am the unlikeliest person of all to go into this line of work"? Life is full of surprises. God is full of surprises. When I was little, I was very much protected from death, especially after my mother died. I remember overhearing my stepmom

Mimi tell my Dad there was a dead blue jay in our backyard, and he'd best remove it "before Mary sees it." That's how tender I was, or how fragile I appeared to be. Who would have guessed I'd grow up to become a hospital and a hospice chaplain in my young adult years?? I was also a very **shy** child. I was afraid to answer the phone until I was nearly in high school (?). Who would have guessed I'd grow up and assume the very public, people-intensive role of a parish pastor? Life is full of surprises. God is full of surprises.

Maybe your career path doesn't surprise anyone who knows you well. Maybe you're more likely to say, "I'm the unlikeliest person of all to have done a polar bear plunge" or "to have run a marathon," or "to make a goal" or "to live where I do" or "to have met and married this great person." Life is full of surprises. God is full of surprises....

.... Like in today's 1<sup>st</sup> lesson about the call of the prophet Isaiah. Similar to Simon Peter in the Gospel, Isaiah is frightened to see the LORD "high and lifted up," attended by angels; he's terrified as he feels the pillars of the Temple shaking. He is horrified to be in the Presence of such holiness, because he clearly knows his own sinfulness. Notice that nothing is said to downplay or contradict either Isaiah or Simon Peter's sin. But after their confessions of unworthiness there is cleansing, absolution, in the form of a live coal laid on Isaiah's lips, and in the form of Jesus' call for Simon to embark on a new career catching people. Life is full of surprises. God is full of surprises....

In today's 2<sup>nd</sup> lesson St. Paul makes his own confession of sin and unworthiness: "*...I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.*" But then he humbly and proudly continues, "*But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain.*" (1 Corinthians 15:9-10) Hopefully we can echo Paul and say of

ourselves, too, whatever our particular circumstance: “... *By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain.*”

Inexplicably, God **chooses** to deputize each of us for Kingdom work. Not just pastors, deacons, Sunday School superintendents, church musicians, but **all** of us. Each one of us is a unique piece in a divinely designed puzzle, a unique and irreplaceable thread in the tapestry of the Kingdom of God. Each one of us has divinely dispensed gifts needed in order for God’s Kingdom to come and God’s will to be done on earth as it is in Heaven, on our watch, in our neighborhood, nation and world.

It **could** be that what makes us feel totally **unsuited** for **any** form of Kingdom work is what makes us most effective in the special ministry for which we’re uniquely qualified, the particular need only we can fill. For instance, a person may feel deep pain about wasted, even destructive years in the thrall of some addiction. But once grace enables recovery, day in and day out, who is better able to accompany others in need of recovery or on the road to recovery or struggling to remain in recovery? Henri Nouwen referred to this person as “the wounded healer.” Another example is the widowed person who leads a bereavement support group, or the military veteran who works with other vets who suffer from PTSD, or the ex-felon who encourages and mentors those recently released from prison: all of these are wounded healers, whose experience of suffering becomes a source of healing for others.

Isaiah’s overwhelming experience of the holy, his spontaneous confession of sin, the cleansing of his soul through the burning coal’s cauterizing kiss of his lips, **liberate** him for the Lord’s work. The burden of his guilt has been lifted and the energy that used to be wasted carrying that weight around is freed up for service!

*“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”*  
(Isaiah 6:8)

Our sin is real, but so is God's forgiveness. In a follow-up letter to the fledgling faith community in Corinth Paul writes about repeatedly begging the Lord to remove his "thorn in the flesh," some unidentified source of pain:

*... but [the Lord] said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness. So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. (2 Corinthians 12:9)*

God is full of surprises....

In Max Lucado's *Cast of Characters: Common People in the Hands of an Uncommon God*, there's a whole chapter about today's Gospel: Simon Peter's boat becoming Jesus' pulpit, the miraculous catch of fish, the call of Simon (and Andrew, James and John) to stop catching fish and start catching people. Lucado describes Simon saying:

"Go away from me, Lord, I'm a sinful man.' There wasn't anything else I could say.

I don't know what he saw in me, but he didn't leave. Maybe he thought if I would let him tell me how to fish, I would let him tell me how to live.

It was a scene I would see many times over the next couple of years – in cemeteries with the dead, on hillsides with the hungry, in storms with the frightened, on roadsides with the sick. The characters would change, but the theme wouldn't. When we would say, 'No way,' he would say, 'My way.'"

"My power shows up best in weak people" (2 Cor. 12:9 TLB).

God said those words. Paul wrote them down. God said he was looking for empty vessels more than strong muscles. Paul proved it.<sup>1</sup>

May we be empty vessels, aware of our failures in love, quick to confess them, trusting in the reality and power of forgiveness, liberated from our burden of guilt, at-the-ready to be wounded healers, rejoicing that our God is full of surprises, countering our incredulous "No way," with His emphatic "**My** way."

<sup>1</sup>Max Lucado, *Cast of Characters: Common People in the Hands of an Uncommon God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), p. 197.

