

Albany Presbyterian Church
February 9, 2025

We come from the hills of Nazareth, where Jesus escaped the crowd seeking to throw him off a cliff, all the way to the Lake of Gennesaret, also known as the Sea of Galilee. Just before chapter 5, Jesus entered the region of Galilee, teaching and healing in the synagogues and the homes of those suffering from various illnesses, including Simon's mother-in-law. Luke tells us that Jesus refused to settle in any one place. In Luke 4:43, Jesus stated, "I must preach the good news of the Kingdom of God to the other towns because that is why I was sent."

In this passage, Chapter 5 recounts the well-known story of Jesus meeting and calling his first disciples, who were fishermen, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Matthew 4:18-22 and Mark 1:14-20 tell the same story with slight variations. The account in which Jesus instructs the fishermen on how to catch fish—despite their earlier lack of success—appears only in Luke and John. However, John recounts this event after Jesus had risen from the dead in chapter 21. Jesus told them, and when they followed his instructions and put their nets into deep water, they caught so many fish that their nets began to break.

This is clearly about Jesus calling the disciples to be fishers of people. This well-known story initiated the gospel narrative and, more importantly, sparked the movement that became the church. Interestingly, unlike other rabbis of his time, who had people come to them to request them to be their disciples, Jesus reached out to them first and called them to be his disciples.

Though this is clearly about the calling of Peter and the calling of Isaiah, I wonder, with these two stories, the gospel and the text from Isaiah 6, today we are invited to think about these stories from a slightly different angle, that is, perhaps with this question... how we encounter God in our lives. How do we experience God's presence?

Many of us will say that contemplation is the way to connect with God, where in the quiet stillness of our souls, we become aware of who we are and who God is. As John Main said in his book, 'Word into Silence,' "Our real mission, or our first task, is to realize our own vocation and, in the expansion of the Kingdom among our contemporaries, find our own spirit, for this is our lifeline with the Spirit of God..."

But there are more ways that we encounter God. As we read Isaiah and other biblical texts, many people have dramatically encountered God, often through visions and profound spiritual experiences. As we read through Isaiah, particularly the chapters leading up to chapter 6, we can appreciate Isaiah's detailed and vivid visions regarding God and the presence of heavenly beings. These include visions, stories, and songs, all revealed to Isaiah by God to help him communicate the message he was meant to deliver. Unfortunately, the message was far from pleasant. "Therefore, the Lord's anger burns against his people; his hand is raised, and he strikes them down. The mountains shake, and the dead bodies lie like refuse in the streets." (5:25)

The visions and images of Isaiah are unfamiliar to us, even at the beginning of chapter 6: "The Lord is seated on the throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe fills the temple. Above him are seraphs, each with six wings. With two wings, they cover their faces; with two, they cover their feet; and with two, they fly. They call to one another, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory."

Sometimes, our experience of encountering God can be frightening, the kind of threshold and doorposts shaking temple filled with smoke scary. Enough to cry out in fear... "Woe to me, I am done..."

This resonates with what we see in Peter. When Peter realized he was in the presence of God and experienced the divine power of Jesus firsthand, his reaction was profound. Peter fell at Jesus' feet in complete and utter terror, as noted in verse 8, where he said, "Go away from me, Lord."

Sometimes, we can encounter God in ordinary, day-to-day life. Just as Jesus entered Peter's ordinary life, we also experience God entering our lives in Jesus. Jesus meets us where we are, just as He met Peter where he was. At work, during one of his most frustrating moments, Peter and his fellow fishermen found themselves at a significant loss because despite working all night, they hadn't caught a single fish.

Simon Peter must have recognized Jesus as a healer Jesus. Jesus healed his mother-in-law and had previously been in his house. (Luke 4:28) It makes sense that he would not question Jesus when he came and took over his fishing boat. He likely knew that Jesus was a special rabbi who frequently preached in their synagogues. However, he probably did not recognize that God was present in Jesus until he witnessed the power Jesus demonstrated before his eyes. "Go away from me, Lord, for I am sinful." Many commentators suggest this was not merely a polite refusal out of humility; when Peter said these words, he was terrified, overcome by fear and trembling. This is the reaction expected from those who encounter the presence of God.

Isaiah was equally terrified, and he thought he was going to die. "Woe to me!" he cried. Verse 5 says, "For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty."

What fascinates me about these stories is that, in various ways, people encounter God and respond with a crucial, common reaction: a profound fear of having recognized their true selves. Yet, God comes to them not when they are perfect and not when they are fully prepared but meets with them where they are and just as they are, flaws and all.

And for those who encounter God, He offers the grace of redemption, much like the angel of the Lord touching Isaiah's lips, which is an act of cleansing, removing his guilt by saying, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." Similarly, Jesus spoke words of comfort that restored Simon's confidence. "Don't be afraid," Jesus said, redeeming Peter, who felt worthless and fell short of God's grace.

In his book *Understanding Confession*, Richard Foster of the *Renovare* movement says confession is the most important spiritual discipline. Confession, whether private or public, allows us to access God's grace and mercy, enabling us to experience forgiveness and healing for our past sins and sorrows. It is the means through which God's grace enters our lives and transforms them according to His purpose.

In this way, encounters with God or His presence lead to repentance, forgiveness, and transformation, ultimately resulting in a vocation or calling.

Isaiah was chosen as God's prophet, while Peter was destined to become a fisher of people. God's call inspired Isaiah to proclaim His redemption and salvation. The call of God through Jesus transformed Peter, an ordinary fisherman from Galilee, into Jesus' beloved and trusted disciple, Cephas, upon whom God built His church.

This is how God calls us; this is how God always comes to us. God is present in all things, always and everywhere, despite our failures and shortcomings, regardless of whether we have unclean lips and live among those with unclean lips. God is with us, whether we are fully aware of ourselves or not. We will still see the King, the Lord Almighty, reaching out to us, desiring personal encounters with each of us. We have a God who loves us and wants us to meet Him in quiet moments, in prayer, in the whirlwind

of fire and the earthquake, and this same God desires to meet us in our everyday lives, no matter where we are, what we are, or who we are... Jesus meets us and calls us to follow... come and follow...

Time for reflection...