

## Luke 5:1-11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.' Simon answered, 'Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.' When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signalled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!' For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.' When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

## Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;  
the whole earth is full of his glory.'

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: '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!'

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.' Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'

The pandemic has made us all adjust in some way or another. Speaking for myself, it has been far too easy to look at the losses. Preaching to an empty sanctuary is hollow in more ways than one. Recommendations to not visit people, or not being permitted to visit people, or making a choice to not visit an unvaccinated person has raised many questions about my vocation. The complications of traveling south to visit relatives has tainted my life. Woe is me. Woe is us. There is trouble in our texts for this day and there is trouble in our world. There is hope in the texts of this day and there is hope in our world. My plan for this morning is to hold my experience, and possibly some of yours, in the light of our scriptures. And as is my custom, I will intersperse those reflections with stories of those who have found redemptive ways to persevere. Let us begin with the scripture texts.

When I first sat down to look at the four readings of this morning, three themes seemed to emerge to me. First, each of the persons at the center of the text feel a struggle in their life. Isaiah states it baldly that he is lost, that he is man of unclean lips, that he is living among a people of unclean lips (Is 6:5). In Luke chapter 5 Simon Peter has just spent the night fishing with no catch; and there was no livestream to draw in even a few fish. Psalm 138:3 reads, “On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength, you strengthened my soul”; one doesn’t typically call out if things are going great and an increase of soul might suggest less than an optimum soul force for the Psalmist. Not read in our worship service but tied to the lectionary readings is a section of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15. 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians is a whole book devoted to a wounded and conflicted congregation for which Paul takes ownership (did Paul have a sense of failure?). And then we hear him write in 15:9-10 that he sees himself as least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle...but by the grace of God I am what I am”. Maybe on account of my own pandemic sadness I tapped into the collection of human grief present in our biblical texts.

It is time for a song of encouragement because our sadness and grief is not the end of the story, and I will say more about that shortly. This song is a new release from Jann Arden which I heard on CBC radio while chopping vegetables, running errands, or something mundane. We have permission to use it.<sup>1</sup>

“Steady On” by Jann Arden (3:32 minutes)

Where do we go?

How do we get there?

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<sup>1</sup> Hello Patrick; there should be no problem using for the livestream service. If it’s a private broadcast, or for user generated content on Youtube shouldn’t be an issue. The New “Steady On” Video will be also be out on Youtube on February 4th. Best of luck! Michelle: Jann Arden Management, Vancouver.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFtNrcDHHPU>

How do we know the way the road is hard to follow?  
Steady on, steady on, steady on, steady on, steady on, steady on  
Steady on my sunlight daughter, steady on  
Steady on my sister, brother, steady on, oh-oh-oh-oh  
How do we find? (How do we find?) Light in the shadows  
This is the time, the day, the moment to fly your arrows  
Steady on, steady on, steady on, steady on, steady on, steady on  
Steady on my darling mother, steady on  
Steady on my perfect other, steady on, oh-oh-oh-oh  
Steady on and keep your shoulders square and true  
Steady on and hold your heart in front of you  
Steady on, steady on, steady on, steady on, steady on, steady on  
Steady on, steady on, steady on, steady on, steady on, steady on  
Where do we go?  
How do we get there?  
How do we know the way the road is hard to follow?  
Hard to follow  
Steady on...

A second aspect of the texts to which I was drawn, and alluded to earlier, is the fact that God is not phased by our sadness, our feelings of inadequacy, our sense of limited capacity, or our lostness. God sends to Isaiah a Seraph who gives him a tongue to speak. Jesus climbs on board Simon Peter's boat—Jesus climbs into our boats, think about that—in the midst of futility. In Psalm 138 the community hears the thanksgiving of one who has received respite. In spite of his languishing church plant, Paul continues somewhat upbeat about the prospects of Christian living and a Christian community in Corinth.

In past weeks we have heard references to honoring the gifts of others and well as learning to live love. The teachings of Jesus help us do this. The existence of the Eternal Christ helps us do this. Jesus climbs into our boat and helps us live steady on. Christian congregational life is about formation; ideally, we form people who dwell in the presence of Christ and live the teaching of Jesus regardless of our circumstances. If we want to be better humans, we might consider going to church; particularly the church pastored by Susanne and Patrick. People are formed through song, scripture, community support, practice of habits, and not least of all stories. By the way, it is time for a story...

I have no doubt that many of you are acquainted with Brother Lawrence. If you are or if you are not, a tidy description will be a source of edification. Brother Lawrence was a scullery worker in a 17<sup>th</sup> century monastery. His deep piety, spirituality, and humble service came to light through a visiting official.

According to Brother Lawrence, wherever we might find ourselves, whatever the task at hand, we [can] perform our duties with a consciousness of God's loving presence. With such an awareness all our activities become hallowed; we would thus find ourselves in a state of continuous prayer or conversation with God.

In this light there [is] no special distinction between traditional spiritual disciplines...and the daily tasks with which Brother Lawrence was primarily occupied, scrubbing pots and chopping vegetables. It was well to go to church. But it was also well to construct an oratory in one's heart, in which to return and dwell. "Our sanctification," he believed, "did not depend upon changing our works, but in doing for God's sake that which we commonly do for our own"...

[Brother Lawrence] spent the [last] forty years [of his life] in the monastery kitchen, and there he died at the age of eighty. He accomplished no great deeds and left no writings beyond a handful of letters...Brother Lawrence made no distinction between great works and small. As he liked to observe, God "regards not the greatness of the work, but the love with which it is preformed."<sup>2</sup>

In honor of Thich Nhat Hanh, who recently died and who lived in the Spirit of Brother Lawrence, I offer the following from this great Buddhist teacher speaking to a group of Christians. You have to confirm your sacramental value "every day, and more that—every hour, every moment of your daily life. Drink your coffee in such a way that the Holy Spirit is strengthened in you. Cook your dinner in such a way that the Holy Spirit is strengthened in you...Is it sufficient to go to church every Sunday?... A few hours in church cannot counterbalance the time [you] spend out of the church if confusion, anger, and destruction will take over".<sup>3</sup>

God and Christ find us where we are: clean lipped or not, successful fisherman or not, sad or happy Psalmist, guided or misguided Paul, in the kitchen or in the board room, in the apartment or on the trail. Jesus climbs in our boat. Seraphs hum around us. Divine visions come to us. And then we must decide what to do.

Each of the central human characters in our Biblical stories for today respond to God or Christ in the affirmative. Isaiah allows his tongue to be seared. Peter and his buddies, despite their experience, lower the nets on the other side. The Psalmist remains trusting. Paul allows scales to fall from his eyes and hardness from his heart. It requires great humility to trust in God and the Christ,

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophet, and Witnesses For Our Time* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), pp:24-25.

<sup>3</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, "Going Home: Jesus and the Buddha as Brothers (New York: Riverhead Books:1999), p. 96.

and I do not minimize that fact. When we trust, though, good things can happen in our lives and world. And that takes me to our final section of the morning.

In Psalm 138:4 we hear “All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O LORD. “All the kings of the earth” is a phrase which appears several times in the Revelation to John (the last book of our bible). In there, and all of the biblical text in fact, the “kings of the earth” are not scripted in a good light. In the end, though, the kings of the earth are ushered in the heaven come down to earth. Are they prisoners of war?? Have they come to a deeper recognition God’s intention for our world?? In the end I think the Kings of Earth will be reconciled to God. Psalm 138 and the book of Revelation point in that direction; at least that is the strong possibility with which N.T. scholar Richard Baukaum leaves us.<sup>4</sup> The Kings of the Earth sing a new song (Ps 138:5), isn’t that amazing?

Like most of the prophets, Isaiah does not have an easy life. Saying “yes” does not mean things will be easy. Still, though, the generational impact and spiritual impact of Isaiah saying yes is devastating in a good way. The chapters written were read to a Jewish community in exile. The chapters written spoke to early Christians who understood in the writings a foreshadowing of John the Baptist and Jesus. The chapters written inspired parts of Handel’s composition of the *Messiah*, which some days are all I need to hear to be in a better space (and I would guess I am not the only one). When Isaiah says, “yes”, generations are blessed.

Paul said “yes”. I do not agree with everything Paul wrote or is attributed to have been written by him. But I will say this: Paul traveled hither and yon, even to the likes of Corinth, to share about his experience with Christ. I would like to sit down with Paul and visit, and maybe someday I will. We will walk and we will talk and then we will find ourselves at Friendship Inn serving and talking and talking with others. Harm has come from some of what Paul wrote and is attributed to him, and also some good. A mixed bag he is, like many of us.

This leaves us the story of Simeon Peter in Luke 5. Peter follows the words of Jesus and drops his nets once more. I was curious about the best time to go fishing on the sea of Galilee; nothing conclusive there. There were many reasons to fish at night: escape the heat of the day, escape the tax collectors, prepare for the day’s sale.<sup>5</sup> No doubt exhausted, Peter returns to the sea after a futile night of fishing and drops his nets. It yields a massive catch it was. Maybe a metaphor for the ministry of the early church.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Baukham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> See more about 1<sup>st</sup> Century fishing economy at: <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/places/related-articles/fishing-economy-in-the-sea-of-galilee>

Words of discipleship and a conclusion:

- Go into the deep. Jesus first encountered Simon Peter in chapter 4 of Luke's Gospel. In chapter 5 we have Jesus climbing into Peter's boat which yields a large catch of fish. Peter leaves everything, even the fish, and follows Jesus. In chapter 6 he is named an apostle. We are all on a journey. Go into the deep with Jesus on board. And who knows where it will lead.
- Grounding ourselves in a contemplative awareness of God is what enabled Brother Lawrence to not only keep his sanity while scrubbing pots, but to minister to others. It has allowed Thich Nhat Hanh to inspire people across borders and religious affiliation. Question: what are each of us doing to ground ourselves in the one in whom we live and move and have our being?
- Finally, can we have some grace for our own failures and the failures of others?? Paul & Corinth was not a shining jewel of the early church, and yet God invested in them. The gospels record the ups and downs of Peter, and yet God invested in him. Isaiah was not necessarily respected or valued in his own time, and yet God uses the legacy of the prophets. Can we trust God is doing such for not only others, but for us??

I conclude this sermon with a blessing from the least of the apostles: may the God of peace sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept complete at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this (1st Thessalonians 5:23-24 adapted). Amen.

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