



ALL SAINTS CHURCH

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

Astounding Infusions Of Grace Despite All The Evidence To The Contrary

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.

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On one Sunday every season of the Epiphany, the church's lessons focus on the issue of "call." The theological connection between Epiphany and call is that in order for God to be made manifest in life – in order for God to show forth divine light – God needs people. Of course, God can be manifest in a stunning sunset or sunrise to be sure, but God's greatest epiphanies are when divinity expresses itself through humankind. Today all three lessons focus on "call." They deal with our being called by God to do the work that is our true work. Today's worship bids you and me to reflect on where you and I are this morning vocationally.

One of the central jobs of my life is constantly to be thinking about vocation – not just in my own life but the vocational lives of the colleagues around me, the vocation of All Saints itself, the vocation in the lives of those who apply for positions at All Saints, vocation as it plays out in the lives of those who wonder if they are being called to the priesthood or diaconate in the Episcopal Church, and vocation as it plays out in the life of everyone with whom I speak, particularly about the transitions in their lives. Retired people think about their vocations – "What should I do with my life now?" – as do those who have lost a loved one, lost a marriage, lost a job, lost a degree of functioning in their bodies, and on and on. In fact, most epiphanies about our true vocations come to us in the midst of personal or community or national crises. As an example our Lent Event speaker this year who will be with us next month, Serene Jones, the first woman president of Union seminary, will speak with us about the trauma of her losing her marriage and then her health and the profound traumas that ensued and how trauma became the crucible of grace and new calling for her.

I want to remind those of you who already know and tell those of you who are new to our vocational discussions at All Saints that one of the compasses I constantly use to discern God's call in life is a definition of vocation given by the writer and Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner. He starts his definition by saying that vocation of course means "Call". For Buechner one discerns one's call by noting two things in life – what we really enjoy doing and what the world really needs. One of his examples is a woman who is a doctor in a leper colony who hates her work. She is clearly doing what the world needs but this particular physician is not enjoying it. So being a doctor, Buechner reasons, in a leper colony is not this person's call. Buechner's other example is of the man who writes deodorant commercials. He loves his work but Buechner questions whether the world really needs deodorant commercials. Buechner then

concludes his definition. “Neither the soft berth nor the hair shirt will do. One’s vocation is where one’s deep joys and the world’s deep needs meet.”

So that is one touchstone for thinking about our call. The moveable feast that happens throughout life called “vocation” is usually found where the world’s deep needs and our deep joys meet.

What these lessons this morning introduce is a second concern – the issue of worthiness. The prophet Isaiah in the first lesson (Isaiah 6:1-8), the apostle Paul in the second lesson (1 Corinthians 15:1-11), and the disciple Peter in the gospel (Luke 5:1-11) all have in common a sense of being or feeling unworthy. This commonality is underscored in the text where the word “Yet,” appears in the first lesson and in the gospel.

Isaiah is standing before God in the temple and a moment of judgment comes to him. Now judgment, I rush to emphasize, in the Bible does not mean condemnation. Those of us who live in the culture of fear think that judgment equals condemnation, but in the Bible judgment means turning the lights on of your awareness so that you can see the reality and true impact of your life and your relationships, your addictions, your life patterns, your allegiances, your ideologies, the way you spend your money, what you do with your time, in short, your priorities. Judgment is a form of gracious epiphany. Isaiah sees this about his life and the life of his people. He says, "Woe is me! I am doomed (or lost), for I have unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; YET my eyes have seen the Ruler, God Omnipotent!"

Then in the gospel, Peter is told by Jesus to let down his nets where he had already been fishing all night. Peter complains to Jesus that he is the fisherman and Jesus is a carpenter and that he, Peter, does know a thing or two about his own business. (Now the text doesn’t say that but I know it was going on in Peter’s mind). [laughter] So Peter says to Jesus, “Rabbi, we have worked all night long and have caught nothing. YET if you say so, I will let down the nets.” When they had done this, the text says, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled 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, Rabbi, for I am sinful!" Now in the second lesson St. Paul notes that he also was called to his work despite his undeserving. “I am the least of the apostles; in fact, because I persecuted the church of God, I do not even deserve the name apostle. But by God’s favor I am what I am.”

And that’s the point, right? By God’s favor, by God’s grace we are called to do and be what we do and are despite all the evidence to the contrary. It is always an astounding infusion of God’s Grace. It is important to keep ever in mind that God does not call the qualified; God qualifies the called. That is why daily awareness of the movements of grace in our lives is essential.

It is simply mandatory, if we are to live lives on God’s terms, not only to put ourselves at the disposal of God’s Grace, but also to learn to practice the awareness of God’s Grace and its movements in our soul, in our consciousness, in our lives, and our relationships moment by moment.

Our AA friends talk about living one day at a time. Living by Grace's constant instruction and correction calls for us to live one moment at a time. Because grace is constantly our teacher every moment, then in every moment something about grace is at stake. Grace is our teacher in every moment – moment by moment qualifying us to be instruments of grace for the work God has set before us and called us to do despite the fact that we almost always are called to tasks that have the steepest of learning curves.

For those of you who have come to All Saints in the past 15 years, let me tell you about a brilliant priest on staff before I was chosen to be rector here. His name is Bill Rankin and now he is in charge of Global AIDS Interfaith Alliance. When it was announced that my predecessor George Regas was retiring and the search committee was formed, and the job descriptions were written and sent out, Bill Rankin said “ We are now about to have a revelation. When the successor of George Regas is named, we will then see who in the entire Anglican Communion is the craziest priest alive.” [laughter]

Professor Brueggemann of the Old Testament said all “calls” every call in the Bible has the following formula: One, a vision of splendor; two, an awareness of inadequacy; and three, a readiness for dispatch.” (Brueggemann, Isaiah 1-39, p. 60) It can happen in a temple, it can happen on the road, or it can happen in your work place.

Now, two more points.

“I will make you fishers of people,” Jesus says to Peter and those with him. There is no evidence in the text that shows this is about going out to save souls for Christ, which is the way conventional Christianity has it. Jesus was steeped in the prophetic mindset and the prophetic scriptures. In Jeremiah, Amos, and Ezekiel, fishing for people did not mean obviously in the mindset of these Hebrew prophets, winning souls for Christ. It related to pulling people out of a life of violence, injustice, discrimination, and materialism. The prophetic understanding of our call, using the metaphor of fishing for people, is for you and me to live in such a way that we call one another as well as the church, the nation, and the world away from practices and policies that promote war, retaliation, discrimination against categories of people, and giving our lives over to corporate manipulation. Jesus wants us to live in the Kingdom of God, the Reign of God where Dr. King's trinity of evil, bigotry, violence, and materialism are not the motivations for our lives.

Finally, we cannot hear and head our true selves and our true vocation and call if you and I are not willing to go out into the depths of life beyond our comfort zones. Jesus called these disciples into their true vocation after (according to the text) he released their boats from their moorings and asked them to put out into deep water – the deep water of risk, daring, unfamiliarity, and unguaranteed success. A call from God it seems to me is always about going deeper in life, digging deeper. All the great poets write about call. The great contemporary poet Mary Oliver writes, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do/With your one wild and precious life?” In another poem she mentions this movement into deeper waters and talks about going into the depths. She says,

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,

though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice-
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
...
little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do
determined to save
the only life you could save
"The Journey," by Mary Oliver

In an poem I keep close to my soul, she says,

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.
When it is over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.
I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.
Mary Oliver, "When Death Comes"

My friends, the problem with the conventional religious concept of discipleship, the one that is too light a thing, too superficial for Jesus. The problem with it is people think that it has to do with being a Christian disciple. My understanding of Jesus is that being a Disciple or being called to be a disciple/follower of Jesus doesn't have to do with being a "Christian" disciple. It has to do with living in the depths, with calling others to live in the depths or fishing for people

for the justice and peace of God's reign which means to call people out of the superficialities and pettinesses that the political culture of Washington DC and corporate media define as humanity.

These stories this morning are about the fact that God wants us, wants to use us and God needs to use us despite all that has gone wrong in our lives or that would indicate something to the opposite. It also is about our going out into the depths of life beyond difference, beyond injustice collection, beyond mistakes, to have a life that is aligned with the very heartbeat of the cosmos and to catch fish or other people and lure them away from lives of superficiality, discrimination, violence, injustice, and materialism.

This means to go into life's deeps. It also means that we have to give up our inferiority complexes (and along with them our superiority complexes) because God qualifies the called rather than calls the qualified. Our vocation as always is to live in such a way that we can give others the tools they need for healing themselves and for abundant living.

So, the question this morning to you and me is—are we willing to live an entire life postured as Isaiah and Jesus, living a life that is always ready to say, “Here am I send me.”

Amen.