

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

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Jim Bender

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Remembering the First Time

Do you remember where you were when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated?

Most folks living at the time do—often in a rich, detailed tableau.

They can tell exactly where they were and what they were doing,
some even what they were wearing, the weather,
the colors and textures of light.

It made a memory so vivid that repeated telling does not lead
to overhearing it.

It will undoubtedly be the same in 50 years about 9/11,
but I don't expect to be around. (Slight)

Do you remember when you encountered your first Volkswagen?

Believe it or not, that came up at a recent gathering.

Incredibly, almost everyone there had owned a VW at one time or another.

Given the maintenance nightmare stories shared with affection that night,
and after rounds of "beat this" one-up-manship,
we decided there was actually only one real VW bug
and it just kept being passed around. (Slight)

I remember the first Volkswagen I ever saw....

it was in our backyard.

My father bought the first one on our block long before they were popular.

It was black and probably the ugliest car I ever saw.

My Mother had announced Dad was bringing home a new car
and when we heard him in the driveway,
my brother and I ran out to find....it.

What was he thinking?

But there was that back-back seat as we came to call it...
a great place to stash my little brother. (Slight)

This kind of remembering is fun,

but we are simply warming up for the main event here.

This story of Jesus commanding the future disciples to fish
on the other side of the boat...

do you remember when you heard that story for the first time?

I do vividly.

My parents were going on vacation without kids,
so they dropped my brother off at our maternal grandparents,
and me to our paternal grandparents, with my Grandfather the Moravian pastor.
Blame them, my parents, for my becoming a preacher.

That Sunday, my Grandfather preached from this text.

I had not been in worship much, my parents weren't church goers....
my father was a PK, a Preacher's kid, after all.

Anyway, every aspect of that morning is memorable and remains powerful.

I sat beside my grandmother, the matriarch who never could hide her love
and affection for the grandson entrusted to her care.

She sat me down and explained the deal in her matter-of-fact way:

I had the unadulterated privilege of coming to worship.

I was not to wiggle, squirm, talk or act up---I was to listen.

You would have thought I had just been sentenced to purgatory!

What had I done to deserve this?

With the same fear and trembling as Isaiah described, I entered the sanctuary.

I'd seen my grandfather in the pulpit before, of course....Christmas and Easter.

But my parents had always supplied some kind of diversion.

However, this day, there were no scratch pads, no crayons.

Certainly no electronic toys since they didn't exist.

The holy of Holies could not have been more frighteningly
fascinated for Isaiah.

The light from the window came streaming down over his face,
spotlighting him and the pulpit in stark contrast to the semi-dark nave,
a voice like drawn steel that could keep even the attention
of a bouncy first grader unaccustomed to church. (Slight)

Expository preaching may be dead, but my grandfather practiced it in spades.

Stirringly, dramatically, he drew out the story of Jesus commanding the disciples
to throw their nets to the other side of the boat.

When Simon Peter tried to lift up the overwhelmed nets,
my grandfather's hand reached in front of the pulpit (REACH)
and pulled against the imagined net.

You could see the strain....you could feel the weight.

Yes, expository preaching may be dead, but in the hands of a master storyteller,
the power of the word to grasp us, to hold us, to challenge us is still compelling.

Where were you when you first heard this story?

More importantly: where were you when it first really sank in?

I heard it first in that sanctuary in South Jersey many years ago,

but I really grasped it—was grasped, grabbed and held by it, decades later when Cheryl and I were in Maine visiting her brother and sister-in-law. That was the first time I came in contact with folks who made their living and livelihood fishing.

Out in front of their home, on a bay, were lobster traps...hundreds of them. The dock was just down the road. And from their front lawn, I could watch, with binoculars, the lobstermen hoist the nets unto their boats.... could watch and see what hard, hard work it was. Fishing for a living is and has always been demanding and desperate work.

Imagine then, Simon Peter. Not a successful businessman, just a simple peasant fisherman, broken by work, bone-weary, mind-numbed; and yet when Jesus requested, Peter raised his weary self and painfully, slowly, one more “One more time”, cast the nets.

Imagine his surprise, the joy turning to fear, as the enormous haul threatened to capsize the boat. Peter, accustomed to a few fish from a night’s work, must have been dumbfounded, completely confounded by the windfall. And Jesus ends this by saying, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” (Slight)

Isaiah 6 describes Isaiah’s encounter with the Living God in the temple. As distant and different as it seems from Simon’s story, it is still the same story. Both are narratives of Simon’s and Isaiah’s call, then repentance and response, all through the compelling experience of the fearful and fascinating presence of God.

When God called him, Isaiah in a clear voice said, “Here I am. Send me.” When Jesus called Peter and James and John, they left everything and followed. (Slight) Do you remember when you were first called out by God? When you first heard the persistent voice of God, the still, small voice which calls, cajoles, commands, compels. Maybe when you wrestled, like Jacob at the Jabbock, with an angel? It might have been a knock-down, drag out war with God, and God wins.

Old familiar texts, indeed overly familiar, or as Fred Craddock says, we have heard these texts so often we “overhear the Gospel.”

We miss the meaning because we've heard it to the point
of not hearing anymore.

Remember then, back to the first time.

Remember the awe, wonder and fear on comprehending Isaiah's fear
and trembling in the temple for the very first time.

Remember the awe and skepticism you greeted your first reading
of the miraculous harvest of fish.

Remember so you can appropriate once again for the first time,
the very first time, that powerful, compelling sense
of lost wonder at the word. (Slight)

As Jesus called the disciples to fish for people, as God called Isaiah to prophesy,
remember, and savor the first time you heard each.

Remember, and reanimate your own calling.

Remember, and renew your personal vocation.

Remember, and savor whose you are, who claims you,
and who transforms you.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

BENEDICTION

A new day is dawning. Despite what we see and hear in the world around us, the sunrise is coming. When it comes, it will break through the darkness of our world—darkness caused by violence, hunger, despair, injustice. And all those who now sit huddled in the shadows will be able to rise and walk with confidence in the light. So go from here with courage and hope, to love and serve the Lord.

And may the grace, mercy and peace of God the Parent, Son and Holy Spirit be with you now and always. Amen.

