

God Calls Sinners

Fifth Sunday of Epiphany

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Chesterfield, VA

Set us free, O God, from the bondage of our sins, and give us the liberty of that abundant life which you have made known to us in your Son our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen

Isaiah 6:1-13 (NRSV)

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. ² 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. ³ And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."⁴ The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵ 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!"⁶ Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷ 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." ⁸ 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!" ⁹ And he said, "Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.'¹⁰ Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed."¹¹ Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" And he said: "Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate;¹² until the LORD sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land."¹³ Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be

burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled.” The holy seed is its stump.

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 (NRSV)

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand,² through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.³ For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,⁴ and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures,⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died.⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.¹¹ Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

Luke 5:1-11 (NRSV)

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God,² he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets.³ 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.⁴ When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”⁵ Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.”⁶ When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break.⁷ 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.⁸ But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”⁹ For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken;¹⁰ 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.”** ¹¹ When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

It's good to be back at St. David's this morning. As usual, I've got a title for my sermon. Today it's "God Calls Sinners." Now I don't want you to get the idea that this was my idea. Far from it. No, it's Jesus' idea. I'll get to that in a minute, but first let's look at how God calls sinners in today's readings.

Isaiah describes how God called him as God's prophet. God appears to him in blinding glory in this amazing scene from the 6th chapter of his book. Just the sight of this drives Isaiah to despair. He says, **“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 in our gospel reading Jesus gives Peter a fishing lesson. Peter and his companions have been fishing out on the Sea of Galilee all night with zero results. Now Jesus tells Peter to take the boat out a little way and let down their nets for a catch. To their astonishment, their nets enclose huge shoals of fish to the point that even when the fishermen have filled two boats with fish they're afraid they're going to sink. But instead of being overjoyed Peter is mortified. He falls on his knees in front of Jesus and says, **“Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”**

What's going on here? We have two heroes of the faith in terrible anguish calling themselves sinners. We see Isaiah and Peter in stained glass windows, and carved into stonework on cathedrals. They're supposed to be role models for the rest of us, aren't they? Is it that in our readings for this morning they were each having a particularly bad day, that they were feeling down on themselves? We all do that from time to time, don't we?

We might expect Isaiah to be thrilled to be in the presence of the Lord in the temple. We might think that Peter might feel the same way to see so many fish after staying up all night and catching nothing. But they're both mortified and calling themselves sinners.

What's going on is that Isaiah and Peter are being confronted with the absolute holiness of God. Among other things, "holiness" means "separate". It means that God is absolutely and completely different than human beings. It means that to our way of thinking about ourselves and our world, God is alien and strange.

Let me illustrate by using this room. If I were to hold a level up to the four corners of this room, it would show that each corner is vertical—straight up-and-down. So because all four corners are vertical, if we were to draw imaginary lines from each corner up into the sky, all four lines would be parallel, right? Parallel lines don't touch each other. So none of the four lines would touch each other. That is, until you extended the lines hundreds of light years out into space. Then sooner or later the lines would touch each other. The reason, of course, is that the people who built this building used ordinary construction measuring tools that have proven to measure the verticality of walls over decades, if not centuries. But those measurements aren't exact. They're accurate enough to build a building, but they're not absolutely precise. They can't give us lines that will stay parallel when they're extended hundreds of light years into space.

The tools the builders used to build this building were good enough—not perfect. The same is true of the way we think about ourselves, other people, and the way people do things in this world. We think, “I'm a good person. I don't lie, cheat or steal.” We think, “People are generally good. They're mostly trying to look out for other people.” We think, “Our government or our society, or the countries in the world are OK—they're doing pretty well at getting along with other countries and helping their own people.”

I think we all think things like this from time to time. What we're saying is that people are mostly good enough for the world to work the way it does. Nobody's perfect. And the world isn't perfect, but it's good enough. And anyway, it's all we've got.

We may feel the world and the people living in it are good enough, but God certainly does not. God is absolutely perfect, and he wants the world and the people in it to be perfect as well. He created human beings to be holy and perfect, but all we know is imperfection. That's what makes God so strange and alien to human beings—so holy. Isaiah and Peter find themselves next to God's overwhelming Perfection, and it has a crushing effect on them. God is lots of things, but the one thing we see in these passages of Scripture is how his absolute fiery perfection crushes the souls of imperfect, sinful human beings.

God's standard for all things is perfection. This is what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount: He says, **“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”** (Matthew 5:20 NRSV) The scribes and Pharisees in Jesus' time were

famous for their scrupulous religious obedience and adherence to the smallest rules in the Law of Moses. But even more crushing news comes in Jesus' words in Matthew 5:48: **"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."** How are we going to measure up? We're not perfect!

That is exactly why God the Father sent his perfect Son—for us, to forgive us our sins, to give us Jesus' own perfection. This is the whole point. Did you hear what Paul says in this morning's reading from 1 Corinthians 15? This chapter is a long description of the reality of the Resurrection of the Dead, but notice how he begins: **"I handed on to you *as of first importance* what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures."** Jesus died for our sins—that's of first importance. He voluntarily took all our imperfections, all our sins, our regrets onto himself as he hung there on the cross. And he took them into the grave. But three days later he came out! He defeated sin and death and the powers of darkness that haunt this world.

And Jesus calls us to himself. He calls sinners—not just criminals and the most immoral, but all human beings—because all human beings are sinners. Listen to the words of Jesus: **"I have not come to call the righteous but sinners."** (Matthew 9:13 NRSV) **"Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick; I have not come to call the righteous but sinners."** (Mark 2:17 NRSV) **"I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."** (Luke 5:32 NRSV)

The reason I started this sermon with the disclaimer that the title wasn't my idea is that Christians are often criticized for being judgmental and self-righteous, and calling everyone who isn't like them "sinners." I don't want you to think this is my idea. The reality is God's standard is perfect morality and righteousness, and there isn't a single person in this world who meets that standard. That makes everyone a sinner. No exceptions.

So what hope is there for us? Our hope is in what God says in Romans 3:21-25: **"But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed and is attested by the Law and the Prophets, the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God**

put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.”
(Romans 3:21-25a NRSV)

When we put our faith in what Jesus accomplished for us in his death and resurrection, Jesus takes our sin and gives us his own righteousness—his own perfection—in God’s eyes. God counts us as righteous and holy because we have faith in Jesus. This is why Paul opens many of his letters by calling his fellow Christians “saints.” The literal translation is “holy ones”. And then of course, he goes on to correct their misbehavior, because like all of us, they’re not perfect. But God sees them as perfect. Only Jesus is perfect. When we put our faith in his death for our sins and his resurrection for our eternal life, he gives us his righteousness as a gift. As we live close to him, he changes us through his cross and his Holy Spirit until at the last, as John says in his first letter, **“when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.”** (1 John 3:2 NRSV) That’s why God calls sinners—so he can lavish his love on them and make them holy like himself.

Of course, like the people Paul sent his letters to, we’re not perfect. We have a long way to go. But every day as we study and meditate on how God reveals himself in Scripture, as we pray for forgiveness and guidance, as we deny ourselves to do his will, we are becoming more like him, until at last, we will be like him.

Let us pray.