

**SERMON: “Called Fourth...Into Deep Waters”**

**February 7, 2010**

PRAYER: Eternal God, whose awesome holiness meets us in the midst of daily life, by your Spirit, open to us the reading and preaching of your Word, that it may be to us the living word of our living Lord, convicting us of our sin, and calling us to lives of usefulness in the work of your kingdom of grace; through Christ, our Lord. Amen

OT LESSON: Isaiah 6:1-8

NT LESSON: Luke 5:1-11

From both Old and New Testament we have heard two very different stories of encounters with the **awesome holiness of God**. One is set in the temple in worship--the other, on the open sea. One is set in the context of worship--the other, in the midst of daily work. One comes smelling of smoke and incense—the other, of old fish nets. As different as the stories are, both bear witness to the **awesome holiness** of the God who calls us out of the comfortable ruts of our lives into the deep waters of demanding discipleship.

**“In the year King Uzziah died,”** the prophet Isaiah sees a vision of the Lord God, exalted in glory, sitting upon a throne. Around him are creatures as strange as anything you might find in a James Cameron movie. Each has six wings, and all ceaselessly sing God’s praise. **“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of God's glory.”** A strange vision, unlike anything I have ever experienced.

But look when and where the vision comes. It is not just at any time in general that the vision comes. It is **“in the year that King Uzziah died,”** the year that the foundations of the kingdom of Israel were shaken like an earthquake, as the long and prosperous reign of King Uzziah ended in his death.

Many of us here today know what that shaking of the foundations feels like. Some are old enough to remember the year Pearl Harbor was attacked. Others are old enough to remember the year John Kennedy was shot, and the year Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed. And nearly all of us remember that terrible Tuesday on September 11, when the World Trade Center was destroyed. Events like that are seared into our memory, and so is the way in which those events shook the foundations of our country and our own lives. For the prophet Isaiah, it was in a time when the foundations of his whole world were shaken that he was given a vision of the glory of God calling him to proclaim a message of judgment no one wanted to hear.

But the story Luke tells seems quite different. There’s no incense filling the air, no voice of God shaking the foundations of the Temple--just the quiet request of an itinerant preacher to use Peter’s boat for a while as a pulpit on the sea. Jesus’ request comes to an ordinary man going about his ordinary work of making a living for himself and his family.

Peter is a fisherman. He makes his living by what he can catch. On this particular day he has nothing to show from a long night of hard work. As Peter and his crew are washing the nets to get ready for the next time out, they notice that a crowd has gathered to hear a preacher named Jesus. Jesus climbs right into Simon’s boat and asks him to push a little off shore so that the crowd can hear him more easily. When Jesus finishes his sermon, he turns to Peter and says simply, **“Put out into the deep water, and let down your nets for a catch.”**

Peter's response is pretty much what yours or mine might have been. Time and time again throughout the gospels Peter expresses out-loud what is in the mind of all the disciples. He puts into words our own inner thoughts and concerns. When Jesus asks him to **“put out into the deep water,”** Peter replies abruptly, **“Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing.”** I wonder if in the back of his mind, at least for a moment, was the thought, “Who are you to tell me how to do my business? Look, I’ve been fishing these waters for years. And right now I’m worn out from a long night of catching nothing. Don’t tell me how or where to fish!”

But whatever thoughts may have gone through his mind, what Peter says is quite remarkable and unexpected. **“Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.”** If you tell me to do it, I’ll let out the nets again and see what happens.”

Jesus is not instructing Simon, the fisherman, in how to haul in a greater catch. He is inviting him to trust him enough to leave the shallow places in his life and set out into “the deep water.” That is nearly always where his call to discipleship takes us, into the “deep water,” where we find ourselves “over our heads,” with nearly everything out of our control.

That’s not easy for any of us to do—especially those of us whose lives are about as buttoned-down as the shirts and blouses we wear. Few of us relish the idea of leaving what is familiar and comfortable to set out in a direction that is not clearly mapped-out in advance. But to do so is to live by what the Bible calls **faith**. Understood biblically, faith is not a matter of believing the right doctrines or confessing the right creeds. Faith is a matter of setting out into the deep waters of life, trusting that the one who calls us will see us through, and out of our obedience will produce results beyond all our expectations.

At Jesus’ word Peter lets down the nets again, and soon is startled to find them so full that the nets are about to break and his boat is about to sink. Peter’s response is not that of a fisherman who can’t believe his luck. It is that of a man finds himself in the presence of an awesome holiness that is deeper and more mysterious than anything he has ever known. And the foundations of his world are shaken, too, every bit as much as Isaiah.

In a very different time and place, and in a very different way, Isaiah and Peter each are encountered by the awesome holiness of God. And each is driven to his knees in a sense of his own unworthiness. Isaiah cries out, **“Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen...the Lord of hosts.”** And Peter falls at Jesus' knees and confesses, **“Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”** Two deeply personal encounters with the awesome holiness of the Lord God.

But what about us? Has anything even remotely like that ever happened to you--in worship or at work--in the sanctuary or on the sea? Have you ever experienced the presence of God in a way that drove you to your knees in fear and wonder? There are some in this congregation who have had an experience very much like that, and their whole lives have been changed by it. But others of us, myself included, have not had such an experience. I’ve never experienced anything so awesome that it shook the foundations of my life. Perhaps I’ve lived too much on the surface of life and never

looked deeply enough into its at times frightening abyss? If so, I am not alone in my shallowness. One of the things that has characterized much of Protestantism over the last couple of decades is the loss of a sense of the awesome holiness of the God who encounters us in startling, life-changing ways.

Don McCullough, the former president of San Francisco Presbyterian Seminary, in his book, *The Trivialization of God*, puts it this way:

“Visit a church on Sunday morning--almost any will do--and you will likely find a congregation comfortably relating to a deity who fits nicely within precise doctrinal positions, or who lends almighty support to social crusades, or who conforms to individual spiritual experiences. But you will not likely find much awe or sense of mystery. The only sweaty palms will be those of the preacher unsure whether the sermon will go over...”

McCullough goes on to say, “The New Testament warns us, 'offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is consuming fire' (Hebrews 12:28-29). But reverence and awe, he says, have often been replaced by a yawn of familiarity. The consuming fire has been domesticated into a candle flame, adding a bit of religious atmosphere, perhaps, but no heat, no blinding light, no power of purification.”

“When the true story gets told” says McCullough, “it may well be revealed that the worst sin of the church at the end of the twentieth century (and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century) has been the trivialization of God.”<sup>i</sup>

“The trivialization of God!” Strong words! Words that find confirmation in our own experience. K.C. Ptomey, a retired Presbyterian minister in Nashville, tells of a feature writer for the paper there who had been visiting churches and writing a critique of their worship. He rates the preaching, the singing, even the way the congregation behaves before and after the service. In the process, the writer has become a keen observer of what poses for worship in our culture. He sums up his experience this way.

“To experience the typical Protestant Sunday morning is to experience something odd, something like a charade. Judging from the discourse--the invocation to God, praise, hymns, confession, and sacred text--one would think that the event had something to do with the sacred presence.” What is so odd, the reporter says, is that the prevailing mood of the whole service is “casual, comfortable, chatty, busy, humorous, pleasant and sometimes cute ..... God is talked to and about but without the terrible mystery. A mystery that should set language atremble, silence facile chattiness, and scare us a bit. In the mood of Sunday morning in a typical Protestant church the seraphim address God not as ‘holy, holy, holy’ but as ‘nice, nice, nice.’”<sup>ii</sup>

Ouch! What the writer finds so obviously missing from our services is what Isaiah and Peter both experienced in different ways and different places--the **awesome holiness of God**--the God whose divine majesty exposes our sinfulness and shakes the foundations of our lives, so that we, too, may cry out with Isaiah, “**Woe is me, for I am undone,**” and with Peter, “**Depart from me,**

**for I am sinful man, O Lord.”** For if this awesome, mysterious, infinitely holy God does not forgive the shallowness of our lives and the triviality of our worship, there is no hope for us.

From Old and New Testament alike comes a witness to the awesome holiness of God who meets us when and where God chooses--in worship or in work, in the sanctuary on a Sunday morning, or by the filing cabinets in the office on Monday. We cannot predict how or when or where the Lord God may choose to make known his awesome holiness. We cannot program it by any spiritual technique we may seek to master.

But this we can know--that any authentic encounter with the holiness and majesty of the God beyond all our comprehension will do two things at once. It will fill us with a deep sense of our own unworthiness. And, at the same time, it will call us into the deep waters of demanding discipleship. In the presence of a holy God, we realize our own sinfulness. None of us has any right, on our own, even to stand in the presence of the awesome holiness of the Lord God. And yet God will not let our sinfulness have the final word. By the burning coals of his holy love, God will sear and cleanse us and send us forth into the work to which he calls us. **“Do not be afraid;** he says to Peter, **“from now on you will be catching people.”** Do not be afraid, he says to you and me. From now on the gifts and skills that are yours will be pressed into my service. Trust me and see for yourself. I will give you an abundance you never dreamed of.

Two stories of the call of God--in worship and at work--in the sanctuary and on the sea. Both set before us the **awesome majesty of God** that drives us to our knees, and then sets us our feet again, as he calls us into the deep waters of demanding discipleship. There in way over our heads, we, too, may learn how truly abundant is Christ’s grace to us all.

In the venture of faith, when the foundations of our lives are rocked and we find ourselves in deep water, the good news is that we do not voyage alone. We are guided and upheld by the One who forgives our sins and who calls and empowers, even us, to share in his work of welcoming others into the nets of his redeeming love.

And so now, with humble and contrite hearts, let us prepare to come to the Lord’s Table, that we may catch a glimpse of the depths of his unfathomable mercy, and be nourished in spirit for the work to which he calls us as his servant people, in this time and in this town. To Him be all glory and majesty, all dominion and power, now and ever more. Amen.

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i. Donald W. McCullough, *The Trivialization of God* (NavPress, Colorado Springs, 1995), p. 13.

ii. Told by K. C. Ptomey in a sermon, "Dancing With Holy Dread," Anderson Auditorium, Montreat, NC, July 20, 1997.

