

Epiphany5, Yr C
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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!"

"Woe is me" seems to be an understatement. The prophet was having a vision that was not only very vivid, but also frightening. Everything was immense. The hem of the Lord's robe filled the temple. There were seraphs with multiple wings. There was shouting and trembling and shaking and fire. In all this, the prophet realized that not only was he privy to amazing sights and sounds, but he had also seen the King, the Lord of hosts. The prophet knew that to see the face of God invited death. To make matters worse, the prophet was a man of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips. He felt afraid and hopeless.

We can feel that fear and hopelessness, too.

That's because the Bible - in addition to being God's word to us, the story of our salvation, theology, literature - the Bible is also very good theater. Imagine what a movie director would do with this story. The special effects would be spectacular - so spectacular, perhaps, that we'd lose the real point of the story. The prophet was indeed living among people with unclean lips. They had become so unfaithful, so far from being a people of God, that God had almost lost hope.

The conversation between the prophet and the seraph and then between the prophet and God was wonderful theater, too. The prophet moaned, "I am lost!" The Seraph, instead of just telling him that he was wrong, took a live coal from the altar and touched the prophet's mouth, cleansing it from guilt and sin. A little more exciting than our usual absolution for sin, isn't it? Then we hear from God. God

asked, it seems, a rhetorical question: "Whom shall I send (to these difficult people)?"

If the first reading had stopped there as if it were the first act, the main character would come off as a real hero - very brave and confident. "Here am I," as if God didn't notice him, "send me!"

Good for him! We hear that sentiment many times in the scriptures, sometimes in different words - Samuel, David, Mary, eventually the disciples of Jesus. It's a beautiful thing to say, a selfless and loving thing to say, and we can rejoice with that throng of seraphs crying, holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.

But the lectionary takes us further in this passage. We can get a taste of what happens when God's people say, "Send me."

In the second act, so to speak, the prophet found out that he must take what will be a very unpopular message from God to the people. "Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand. ... Make the mind of the people dull so that they will not understand and be healed."

That seems very harsh unless we understand that the people had ignored every message God had sent so far. Until they hit bottom, they wouldn't repent. Our brave and selfless prophet had a difficult mission, but he had been anointed and he would be supported by God.

It's the same in today's gospel.

In this passage from Luke, we have one of the "large catch of fish" stories. Jesus was beginning his ministry. He'd been baptized. He, like Isaiah, had been "anointed"

for ministry. He spent forty days in the wilderness praying and preparing, and now he had started to preach and teach. But he didn't start in the king's court or in the temple with the high priest. He began his ministry among the common folk -- fishermen, farmers, women, and children. This might make some interesting theater, too. Imagine how a bunch of professional fishermen felt when Jesus, a carpenter by trade, told them to put their nets out again for a catch. Can't you hear the disbelief in Peter's voice: "We've worked all night and caught nothing. But if you say so." We can imagine the eye-rolling the fishermen did - but then they brought in a boatload of fish, and they were amazed.

But the boatload of fish isn't the point of the story. It really doesn't matter how Jesus managed that miracle. The same goes for the vision of Isaiah: it really doesn't matter how the Lord's hem filled the temple or the prophet got his lips singed and didn't die. The point of both passages is that God called Isaiah and Simon and they answered the call. God calls each of us and expects each of us to take a part in building the kingdom of God.

By our baptism we are anointed as Isaiah was - as Jesus was - and as Simon was in today's passage. It doesn't matter that we aren't among the important people of the land. It doesn't matter if we're not even among the important people in the church. What does matter is that we are called to help bring about the reign of God - and we answer that call by discerning our gifts...learning who we are...and then by being who we are to the world.

We don't have to become something or someone that we aren't in order to follow Jesus. Instead, he frees us to bring the best of who we are to him and offer it up as we join him in God's work in the world. Whether you are a lawyer or an artist, a

nurse or a stay-at-home parent, a teacher or a supervisor, a rocket scientist or a ditch digger, Jesus calls us to use the talents and strengths and knowledge and passions that we have to make the contribution to God's Kingdom that each of us individually can make.

God is with us every step of the way, and says to us, "Do not be afraid - be at peace." God desires relationship with us. God calls us to come close, brings us into God's very presence, and then sends us back out into the world to serve others, to seek justice and make peace, to love mercy, and to let others know that God is calling them as well.

May we all be willing to receive the strength to go forth to love and serve. AMEN.

Borrowed in large part from the Rev. Dr. Susanna Metz, from Worship that Works.