

Sermon for February 4, 2007: Call and Response

Isaiah 6: 1-13

1 Corinthians 15: 1-11

Luke 5: 1-11

2008 is an election year – a presidential election year – and even though we’re only a month into 2007, the # of declared candidates, and the # of folks who have set up exploratory committees to see if they are viable candidates, seems to be increasing every week. Some of these folks we’re familiar with – or at least we recognize their names. Others are new to many of us. But all of them are at least considering throwing their hat into the ring for the nomination for president of their respective parties – investing time, money, prestige, and personal pride into the run for the nomination. This is something that these candidates feel strongly about, and will pursue until it becomes painfully clear that for most of them, 2008 will NOT be “their” year.

In many ways, elections are the opposite of calls. If we consider the reaction of the folks in the bible to their calls from the Lord, we invariably see fear, awe, and reluctance in the reaction of those folks who are being called. We don’t know about the struggles that Abraham may have gone through in responding to his call, but we know that Moses was afraid and that he argued with God. When Gideon was first called, in Judges 6:11, he argued with the angel of the LORD, and then put out his fleece – TWICE – seeking reassurance and confirmation of the call. Last week we read about Jeremiah’s response to God’s call – *“Ah, LORD God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.”* But the LORD said to me, *“Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.”* And this week, we have Isaiah’s call. Isaiah sees the LORD sitting on a throne, high and lofty. The hem of His robe fills the temple. Isaiah sees the winged creatures, the seraphim, surrounding the LORD. And Isaiah’s reaction? Fear and dismay – because he knows that he is just a human being, and that in spite of that, he is seeing the King, the LORD of hosts. But the LORD provides for his purification, and Isaiah is reassured, so reassured that when he hears the voice of the LORD saying, *“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”* he responds with, *“Here am I; send me!”* And then he gets the bad news that people aren’t going to listen to him – he will be proclaiming a warning to the people that they will ignore, to their peril. Isaiah’s proclamation will not be music to their ears, because Isaiah’s message calls for change in their behavior, a turning away from the culture of the time, which went along with the ways of the world, and the wisdom of the world – trust in military power, trust in human wisdom, trust in governmental alliances. To read the story of Isaiah’s time as prophet, we really need to start in 2 Kings 16, and then continue in Isaiah 36-39, to read what Ahaz and Uriah, the priest, did; and the beginning of Isaiah’s call. God spoke words of warning to Ahaz and his son, Hezekiah, through Isaiah, which they didn’t often heed. But as the LORD said to Isaiah, the reaction of the people wasn’t Isaiah’s concern – Isaiah was to follow his call, and do and say what the LORD told him to do and say – and that was what Isaiah did.

That was what Paul did. In today’s reading from 1 Corinthians, Paul talks about the handing on of the call – and about how he was unworthy to receive that call, because of his persecution of the early church. It wasn’t until he was struck blind on the road to

Damascus in search of followers of The Way that he realized that he was wrong. And just listen to the ironically call of the disciple in Damascus, Ananias, whom the Lord sent to Paul: **10** *Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, ‘Ananias.’ He answered, ‘Here I am, Lord.’* ¹¹ *The Lord said to him, ‘Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying,* ¹² *and he has seen in a vision* a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.’* ¹³ *But Ananias answered, ‘Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem;* ¹⁴ *and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.’* ¹⁵ *But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel;* ¹⁶ *I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.’* We know that Paul did suffer for the sake of the Lord - and that Paul considered it all as nothing, because of the gain of being an apostle, a follower, of the Lord.

There are at least two other noteworthy things about Paul’s conversion: that arguing with God again; and that this man, Ananias, who was instrumental in Saul’s conversion, is only mentioned once more in the entire New Testament canon, when Paul is telling the story of his conversion to the Jews in the Temple immediately after the Romans have arrested him, in Acts 22. So our calls may or may not be recorded by others, but God calls us all, nevertheless.

It can be scary when God calls us. Look at Peter’s reaction to Jesus’ command to let down the net, after an unsuccessful night of fishing. They have bagged it for the night; they are literally cleaning up when Jesus tells Peter to put out again, and let down those nets one more time. We can almost see Peter rolling his eyes behind Jesus’ back – what does a carpenter know about fishing? And during the day? But he does it anyway – and the blessing of the catch almost sinks two boats. In the face of such overwhelming blessings, what is Peter’s reaction? Fear and awe – just like Moses, just like Gideon, just like Isaiah – and it prefigures Paul’s reaction as well. Peter knows that he is as unworthy as anyone to receive a call like the one Jesus issues – but he gets over the fear and goes anyway – and famously argues with Jesus all along the way, and even, out of fear, denies Jesus three times. Yet Jesus forgave Peter, and used Peter to found The Way, which grew into Christianity.

So what will our response be? We have the font, the font of every blessing, the place of our baptism. And we have the table, where we break bread together, praise God, and ask for His unending mercy on us. We may not be as well-known as Moses, Gideon, Isaiah, Peter, Paul, or even Ananias – but that doesn’t matter. We are all called – and it is up to us to respond to that call or not. I am going to close with a short poem by a famous Christian mystic, Teresa of Avila. (read) Let us pray.

Isaiah 6: 1-13

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. 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. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the

LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory.” 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! 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 one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 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.” 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!”

And He said, “Go and say to this people: ‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.’ 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.” 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; until the LORD sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land. 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

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, 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. 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, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then He appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 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. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

Luke 5: 1-11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on Him to hear the word of God, He saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. 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. When He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if You say so, I will let down the nets.” When they had done this, 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, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; 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." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed Him.