

Isaiah 6:1-13 ~ Luke 5:1-11  
*Yet, If You Say So*  
February 10, 2019 ~ 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany  
The Rev. Dr Laurie Brubaker Davis

*Introduction to Scripture:*

What does it take for God to get our attention? How about several angels with six wings each, fluttering about singing “Holy, holy, holy,” so forcefully that the very foundations of the Temple shake and it then it fills completely with smoke? I’m sure if that happened here at FPC during worship, Don Zais and our Building & Grounds Committee could totally deal with it. Yet, it would definitely get our attention. Or how about being directed by this upstart preacher to fish in the very same spot that you—the professional fisher—have been fishing all night without catching a single fish. You think it’s a crazy idea, and you have just finished washing your nets. Yet, you don’t want to go home empty handed to your wife with nothing to show for a whole night’s work. So, you decide to give it a try, looking around—hoping none of your fishing partners are watching. And then you start hauling in so many fish you need help from your partners to haul this freakish catch in: nets breaking, boats sinking, from the weight of the fish. You think to yourself, “How can this be—it’s unbelievable! It must be God. But what are you saying, God? Not me. Not now. I am not worthy.”

Today, both texts give us two very different stories about that holy, mystical, heavy, experience when heaven and earth converge, and God gets a person’s attention—whether it is with live coals to the lips or hundreds of slimy, scaly fish breaking the nets. And then tells them to essentially “get over themselves.” Why? So that they can cut the tow line of self-doubt and shame, freeing them to set sail on the wind of God’s call on their lives.

Let us now give our full attention to the second story, the one with the slimy, scaly fish, so that we can hear what the Spirit is saying to us in our Gospel Lesson—a fishing story, a call story, and so much more—beginning at Luke 5, v. 1.

*Sermon:*

What was your first word? What was the very first word that you uttered between all the “ga ga’s” and “goo goo’s” and “na na’s” when you were a baby? Of course--*you* don’t remember. But you may have been told. Or perhaps it’s written down in a baby book, or it was posted on Facebook. You may more readily recall your child or grandchild’s first word.

My oldest sister has a dear friend who had two young daughters, and by the time her third baby was born, her demanding career was on the rise in the movie business in Los Angeles. She loved her work, and thought she had worked out a good balance between her work and family life. They had a live-in nanny who took care of running her daughters to school, to their after-school activities, to doctors’ appointments, cooking them dinner, and the like. She made sure she was available for the important games, the recitals, and school conferences. Whenever decisions had to be made, like when the doctor was seeing one of her girls, she’d be available by cell phone for a consult. Being an excellent manager, she’d applied those skills to

the job of motherhood and it all seemed to be running smoothly. Until one day—the day her youngest child began to talk.

Can you guess what her first word was? It wasn't "Da-Da" or "Ma-Ma," but... "Bye-Bye." In fact, that was her only word for a while. Her third child's first and only word was the wake-up call that got this mother's attention. It was a heavy moment. A moment of realizing how she was failing to hear the deeper call, all the way down to the core of her foundation. The pivots on the thresholds of her sense of self, shook. And she responded. She heard it as a call to leave her job for one that was less glamorous, less all-consuming. She heard the call to slow down her career path, and direct more of her attention and time to parenting her three young girls while they were still growing. In her baby's first word, "bye-bye," she heard the call of God saying to her, "Listen to me: you need to change your life because you are missing the mark. Your children need more of your time and attention, now."

Did you notice how Jesus got Simon's attention? It wasn't a mystical vision of angels and smoke in the temple, nor was it an innocent word from a toddler's lips. But like my sister's friend, the story zooms in on a regular work-a-day morning for Simon, beside the Lake of Galilee after a "bad day at the office" where he had been fishing all night with nothing to show for it. Simon was probably feeling self-doubt and shame. If you're a fisherman and you aren't catching any fish, what have you got to show for yourself? This was not recreational "I'd rather be fishing" kind of fishing – this was a matter of survival for their families and village. They couldn't just go to Festival Foods and pick up some fish at the fish counter (sushi, if it's a Wednesday) and call it a day. Fish was one of the few staples in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine diet. It was catch fish, or be hungry you and your whole village. Talk about stress.

And that was precisely when Jesus, after commandeering Simon Peter's boat from which to teach the crowds on the shore, told Simon to, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Being Simon Peter, he didn't hesitate to tell Jesus what he thought about the idea. "Master, we have worked all night long and caught nothing." But he didn't say, "no." None of us can really know why. Maybe he was desperate? Humbled? Maybe he would see that working harder and longer was not the answer. Instead he let down his resistance, his mask of controlled self-reliance and said, "**Yet, if you say so**, I will let down the nets."

Whatever the reason, he did let down his nets. And then what happened? His nets started breaking from the amazing catch—more fish than he could have possibly imagined. All of a sudden, he saw that he was in the presence of a power that was downright freakish. In the melee of nets breaking, boats sinking, Simon Peter falls down to his knees, his mask lifted, he sees himself in the light of God's glory, and says "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." But Jesus will have none of that. He responds with the words, "Fear not. From now on you will be catching people."

Stay with me here. This may be the message you need to hear today: Based on his response to Simon Peter, we can see that Jesus is not in the shame business or the guilt business. Contrary to messages you may have picked up or had baked into your understanding

of God, from church and church tradition, as my colleague and theologian Dr. Stacey Simpson Duke has written, “God does not seek our guilt, but its obliteration.” We see this truth in play back seven centuries earlier with Isaiah in the temple. “Isaiah’s experience in the temple dares us to see past such failures to behold the radical reality that God’s intention has never been our shame.”<sup>1</sup> We see it in our gospel story too: in response to Simon Peter’s, “Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man.” Jesus essentially says: “Get over yourself, come along with me and work for a larger purpose than you ever imagined.”

How do we do that? These stories teach us this truth: Our, “yes” to Christ’s call begins with “yet.” Did you hear how Simon Peter said, “Master we have worked all night long and caught nothing, “Yet, if you say so....” and with that turn of heart, lets down his nets and his ordinary life took an extraordinary turn—one that is still teaching us today. The political, high stakes context of Isaiah’s “yet” is crystal clear: impending political chaos by the way it begins: “In the year that King Uzziah died” in 740 BCE sets the stage for Isaiah’s call smack at the outset of impending political peril and change. King Uzziah was one of Judah’s last truly powerful kings. The power structure on which they depended was crumbling. Bad stuff was about to come down. They could feel the political storm brewing. Sound familiar? In this mess, Isaiah shouts out: “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. Can you start to see it? Our “yes” to Christ’s call begins with the turn of heart suggested in the word, “yet.”

What can happen when we *don’t* make that turn? Sure, we can keep pushing harder and harder. We can try to keep fishing all night. Every night. But at what cost to our own lives and to the coming of Christ’s kingdom? I’ll end now with a cautionary tale that is impossible to forget. It is a fishing story that happened here in America popularized by the movie, “The Perfect Storm.” It is about a commercial fishing vessel, the Andrea Gail, that was lost at sea after being caught in the “perfect storm” of 1991. These professional fishermen were also desperate for a big catch. And they did make a big haul of fish. But they all lost their lives doing it. They refused to heed the warning about Hurricane Grace (ironically named) and what it could do. They could have probably waited out the storm. They would have lost the fish, but saved their lives. They didn’t make that choice. Instead they thought they were stronger and faster. They thought they could beat the storm. They thought they knew better. There was no, “Yet, if you say so,” in their vocabulary. There was no getting their attention to bring them back to their core truth of their deeper purpose. There was no flash of epiphany light on the deeper truth of what was at stake at that moment. They did catch a boat load of fish. But they all died trying to bring them home. It is a tragic story with a tragic ending.

Perhaps you are facing what feels like a perfect storm in your life, a confluence of challenges and struggles beyond your control. Perhaps you are looking at the turbulent political storm raging across our country as we seek to reclaim our core calling, as a nation and as a leader among world powers here in 2019. Perhaps you are wondering what *really is* the State of the Nation. Tune into two different stations on the opposite ends of our political spectrum, and you wonder if they are talking about the same country. Or perhaps you are troubled by the current geo-political struggles in England, Venezuela, Yemen, Afghanistan. Or perhaps what

seems like the inexorable acceleration of climate change in the midst of political squabbling over its cause and impact, that grabs at your gut. The confluence of these issues seems like a “perfect storm” crying out for people of all religions and all nations to take a, “Yet, if you say so,” turn toward the common good of global peace and justice as outlined in Jesus’ gospel mandate in Luke 4:18-21.

If this seems hard, if not impossible, we are in good company. Did you notice how Like Isaiah’s exuberant “Here am I; send me!” quickly turned to “How long, O Lord?” when God laid out the actual work ahead of him? We too, have tough work ahead. We too, are being called to lay waste cities of privilege and to fell the terebinths and oaks of hubris, tribalism, and triumphalism. And instead, to trust the promise of the holy seed in the stump to rebirth, to resurrect, and bring forth the Good News of God’s reign and realm. How can we make this turn? I believe, like Isaiah and Simon Peter, our “yes” begins in the humble spirit of “yet.” “Yet, if you say so,” trusting God’s voice above the clamor of all others, including our own fears and self-doubts.

Let down your nets, FPC, in the chaos of this world. Trust God to supply you with more sustenance than we need to shine the glory of God’s Light, the glory of God’s Good News to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free. May our first and last word to God, *not* be “bye-bye.” But instead, let God release us from the tow line of self-doubt and shame, with the simple word, “Yet.” “Yet, if you say so, Lord.” Why? Because Christ wants you, Christ needs you out there to do this work. No matter what your “job” may be. When you hear Christ calling, no matter how scared you may feel, muster the trust to say, “Yet, if you say so, here am I, send me.”

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<sup>i</sup> Stacey Simpson Duke, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, Year C, Volume 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 226-227.