

“Caught in the Net”

By Steven Chambers

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5th Sunday after Epiphany
Isaiah 6: 1-8
Luke 5: 1-11

Chalmers United Church
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Isaiah went to the Temple one day during a time of great upheaval and distress in the land. Perhaps the turmoil in the land was a result of King Uzziah's death; Isaiah may there for that reason. No doubt the death of this powerful king brought about some kind of crisis: we know that it meant the end of an era of relative independence for Judah. The northern realm of Israel was in a state of near anarchy. Tigleth Pileasar III, King of Assyria, was looking “hungrily at their lands.” What would happen now? Who would lead? Some special insight was needed. Critical events of the day – in any age – can lead us to look beyond ourselves. They can open us to the possibility of encounter with One who is other and beyond us.

So Isaiah enters the Temple and what takes place there is something mystical and filled with awe. It is like Isaiah is entering some vision or dream. He sees God on a throne and the garments of this royal deity are spread out all through the temple. The enormity of God is emphasized. The seraphim, considered to be the highest of the angels, surround the throne of God continually singing praises to God. Their name – seraphim - means, literally, ‘burning ones’. In this vision, these first among the angels cover their faces in the presence of God; truly it is a powerful moment. God is Holy Other here. God is One who is feared but also adored – “Santo, santo, santo, my heart is glad to say the words, You are holy God.” Often we use ‘holy’ to refer to a state of moral excellence; this is different. In the language of the day, ‘holy’ had nothing to do with morality but everything to do with ‘otherness’ or separation (*kaddosh*).

This is a moment that is focused on God. But, it is also moment that touches down in history because we can put some context around Isaiah and his time. Here's how Karen Armstrong describes the moment:

As Isaiah prayed in the Temple shortly after King Uzziah's death, he was probably full of foreboding; at the same time he may have been uncomfortably aware of the inappropriateness of the lavish Temple ceremonial. Isaiah may have been a member of the ruling class, but he had populist and democratic views and was highly sensitive to the plight of the poor. As the incense filled the sanctuary before the Holy of Holies and the place reeked with the blood of sacrificial animals, he may have feared that the religion of Israel had lost its integrity and inner meaning.¹

¹ Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Knopf, 1994), pp. 40 – 42.

Isaiah was terrified, felt guilty and inadequate.

'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!'

Isaiah 6: 5

It is in this kind of moment that Isaiah inhabits. In this ancient writing, set in a particular time in history, all the imagery flows from the emerging mythological traditions of the people. Isaiah in this moment is captivated by the image of Israel's God: at once powerful and gentle, 'holy other', separate and distance, but also personal, able to speak to Isaiah and call to him.

God is not only the source, but God is one who is consistent and fair and faithful in loving relations with humanity. These were things the ancient people had learned. God is not distant from Isaiah; God is not distant from humanity. Isaiah's self-acknowledged inadequacy is addressed by the intervention of the burning ones, *the seraphim*, who touch his lips with a blazing coal: so cleansed through fire, Isaiah is transformed by God. His lips now purified, he becomes fully open to the Word of God and Isaiah hears the call: "Whom shall I send; who will go for us?" And Isaiah, not clean of lips and voice, responds: "Here I am, send me." Here, in this strange conversation is one of the biblical centrepieces of mission: *whom shall I send?* ...the very origin of 'mission' resides in that concept of 'sending'. Isaiah encountered God just as Israel encountered God. Not just a distant God, but a powerful and transforming God, a personal God who spoke and who called him into God's mission.

Simon, the fisher, had an encounter with Jesus on his boat. Now, if you have any experience as a captain of a vessel, which I don't, you might just think it a bit odd that the one who climbs on board the boat owned by Simon starts to give the orders. Perhaps Simon thought it strange, too, because when Jesus instructs him to put the nets down again, he objects: "Master, we have worked all night long and have caught nothing." He subsequently does as he is asked – like many other times in the gospels, when Jesus asks the ridiculous and incomprehensible, people amazingly take action, they obey. And what happens? There is an overflowing abundance of fish.

But wait. Did Simon ask for help? Did he ask for a great catch? For a fishing buddy?

No. Something else is up here. Simon has an encounter with Jesus – and nothing that happens now could have been expected. Simon, like so many others, like Isaiah, considers himself unworthy: "Go away from me for I am a sinful man, he says" But God is in the business of forgiveness and love. And when God forgives, transforms and loves, it is with such abundance that the nets overflow. That's the truth about encounters with God; if you ask, you receive, even that which you don't expect or earn. Grace – the gift of God - is abundant. Welcome into the mission of God, says Jesus. Leave all that you have behind you, and follow me.

Once as I was taking a break from a church meeting in Chile, I went with some of the participants to a fishing village a short distance from Concepcion. We boarded a small, noisy fishing boat to go out for a cruise in the coastal waters for a few hours. The sun was shining brightly, I recall, there was a bit of a breeze and we were entertained by sea lions diving into the sea and sunbathing on small rocky islands. After a short while, we turned around, just as the waters opened up to the broad expanse of the ocean and the waves got noticeably bigger. As communication eased on the boat among people of different nationalities and backgrounds, the story became somewhat clearer. This was not just a fishing boat, or shall I say, it was not simply a fish-catching boat. The captain, and members of the crew, were part of a congregation from the village. Part of their ministry was to go out to sea on occasional nights, and turn on the ship's radio. Then they would then sing hymns, read scripture and offer prayers over the air waves to the huge fishing factory ships trolling the seas just beyond. The little coastal fishing tug would preach the gospel to 400 or 500 people on these massive ships.

“Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch,” said Jesus to Peter.

The fishing folk on that boat are like a family from the small village; they make little money, they fish in a small way compared to the monster ships off-shore. There are global implications here. We talked about that on the lurching boat that day – would there always be fish for the small boats to haul in? Would the large corporate boats soon exhaust the stocks? Those are the questions of coastal, fishing peoples everywhere. And there are implications, too, for those of us who are consumers of fish caught around the world.

These people of the small fishing village in Chile, who form the congregation and who go out to sea, have been caught in the net. Caught by God. They have a vision and an understanding of God's mission, what God wants them to do. It's more than just preaching over the bow that they do, however. These people are reaching out to the big ships, offering their services, sharing social assistance and counseling to the fishers and their families wherever they might be. They are trying to work with government to ensure that local fishing rights are upheld and respected even as they try to co-exist with the large corporate ships. Their prayers are not just for themselves; they are for all, for a much wider community.

Earlier in that church meeting in Latin America, I remember a Methodist bishop proclaiming that “Ours is not a solitary God.” The experience on the boat that day brought that to mind. It was not for themselves alone that Jesus called the disciples; it is not for ourselves alone that we are called into the mission of God. Not for ourselves, not for the sake of the church alone, not for the United Church of Canada, not for Chalmers.

Our God is not a solitary God. God does not work alone. God calls people – many different people, people of diverse faith and those who might say they have no faith. God calls sinful people – we heard that in the reading this morning. God calls all different kinds of people because God is not solitary. God the creator of all desperately wants the good for that creation and God calls people, catching them off guard sometimes – to join in partnership, to work together, to be part of God's mission.

The call to Isaiah takes place in the temple: God is indeed everywhere but that time, God was encountered in a holy place. A place of glittering symbols and soaring mystery. God can be there. God encountered Simon and company not in a designated holy place, but in their workplace, on the sea. They were 'caught in the net' as it were. One of the ways to translate the word 'catch' in that story of Jesus calling the disciples is in the sense of 'taken alive – rescuing from death'. Caught and rescued from death. "As to one untimely born, said Paul, [Jesus] appeared also to me." (I Corinthians 15: 8) He was caught as well.

Once you caught fish, says Jesus to Simon, now you and your partners will catch people. You will lift them out of death. Resurrection. Caught and rescued from death, you will bring hope to others.

There is a cost to pay when you are caught by God, sent out in some way in God's mission. It might be a heavy cost. It might challenge you. It might – as Jayne Mardock (daughter of our moderator Joyce) suggests in her blog this week² - challenge those who are left behind. What did the call mean for the women and children left behind by those fishers now disciples? Oh, the call of God is complicated and the issues of living beyond the call are not easy. 'When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.'

Without resolving it, without fully understanding it, we go on our way – listening, trusting, hoping, being as faithful as we can, being aware that - somehow - the living hope of Jesus will be with us, as we go. AMEN

² <http://soulcycles.wordpress.com/about/>