

**5 Epiphany C. February 10, 2019.**  
**Is. 6:1-13; 1 Cor. 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11.**

I assume that I am one of the few people in the room for whom a meeting hasn't gone at all strange when someone says, "Yes, that's a good idea that will solve our problems, but is it what God is calling us to do?" This kind of language, that assumes that God is very much alive and active and engages directly with our lives and souls, is still common among folks who dress like *this*, but is sounding stranger and stranger among folks whom we might call "normal." There are times when the world of the Bible seems like a very different, strange world. And I think this underlying assumption of how God might still act is one of the hinges that determine just how foreign the Bible feels.

I'm not quite going to try to argue you into assuming what I assume about how God acts upon us. But if you're convinced that God only interacts with us through general structures of creation and universal obligations accessible to anyone through common sense, I invite you to hold your assumptions lightly as we encounter this strange new world of the Bible. It is a world in which God comes to people and calls them to upend their lives and take on an extraordinary new life. These three stories today of God messing up people's lives with a call to a new life, I'm sure, invite us to be confronted by how we are called and who we are called to be.

Feeling as I long have a strong but unspectacular sense of call, I've often been envious of folks who have these miraculous stories of mystical visions like Isaiah and Paul. Isaiah finds himself caught up into heaven with these bashful smoking angels, where he has his potty mouth cured by burning and then is assigned the difficult job of preaching woe until his homeland is destroyed. Okay, so I'm not envious of *all* aspects of that vocation, but at least there is no ambiguity about whether or not God has called him to be a prophet. And while Paul only alludes to his transformative encounter with the risen Christ, Bible nerds will know that the risen Lord appeared to him in a blinding light, that scales formed over his eyes, and that they were healed when a Christian prayed for them to be.

These are big spectacular miraculous moments that could leave no doubt in the minds of the people called; and they are utterly unlike anything I've ever experienced. I think this gospel story of the calling of Peter, James, and John (and I assume that Andrew was there, too) might more easily illuminate for us the more subtle ways God is calling us forward always into new life.

I have broken it down into movements, to see if we can discern a pattern for how God might be at work in our lives. There's no indication that Jesus has sought these guys out. He is going about his business, pursuing his own mission in the world, preaching by the sea. And as the crowd gathers and presses upon him, he finds himself in need of something. He needs a place to stand and there just happen to be a couple boats nearby, the fishing fleet of Simon and Associates: Fishers of Fish, Really Just Fish at This Point. Jesus then just commandeers one of the boats and climbs on in. But at that point he

immediately asks for cooperation, which feels to me almost like an immediate invitation to Peter to join a conspiracy. This is how he gets you: “would you mind just putting out a little from the shore?” The next invitation makes less sense, but there’s little to lose besides time, and much to gain. Jesus sends them back out to the waters to fish some more. They suddenly have a ton of fish. Peter realizes what’s going on and pleads unworthiness. Jesus tells him not to be afraid, promises him that from now on he will be catching people, and they all leave everything to follow him.

It’s still weird, but it’s understandable. It makes sense in our world. And I think it may teach us more than the smoky angels about how God might come mess up our lives. First, I’d like you to notice how almost casual this encounter is. Peter, James, and John, and probably Peter’s brother Andrew, don’t become disciples because Jesus is going through a rigorous search process to find the best and the brightest. They become disciples because they happen to have something that is needed for Jesus’ mission in the moment. This suggests two things to me. First, our talent and apparent suitability may not be the all-decisive factors in what God wants us to do. And second, our lives might be forever changed just because we happen to be nearby when a need arises.

But God doesn’t usually strongarm us into being prophets or apostles or even just more or less functioning Christians. Our God is one who persuades, rather than coerces. Jesus *asks* Peter to put out a little way into the water. Granted, he had climbed into the boat without permission, but then immediately invites Peter into a relationship of cooperation and assistance. And Peter quickly finds that small acts of cooperation with the Holy Spirit can lead to an escalation that before long finds you leaving behind the largest catch of fish you’ve ever had.

And about that catch: Jesus asks these guys to leave everything and follow him just at the moment when they stand ready to make the biggest payday of their lives. They catch so much fish that their ships are sinking—and they leave it all on the shore to follow him out to do who knows what. To become catchers of people. Contrary to the nonsense preached by health and wealth religious entrepreneurs, saying yes to God might hurt, might cost us something or everything.

I think that’s three things for us to have learned from this story about how God might mess up our nicely ordered lives by calling us forward into new life. First, we don’t have to be likely suspects, and the recruiting process is unlikely to be standard. Second, our little acts of cooperation with the Holy Spirit have a way of gaining momentum and before long carrying us on further and deeper into God’s plans than is reasonable to expect. And third, saying yes to God might be costly.

These lessons are helpful, but the point of these texts is also to confront us with the question of what God is calling us towards, now. Or perhaps, what work has God already enticed us into starting, that might be the new path our lives together or individually take? We may not have bashful smoky angels or blinding light that looks like Jesus, but we can be assured that God is calling us into some adventure that leads to life. Amen.