

“When You Don’t Feel Worthy”

Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11

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Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

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Christian faith is a funny thing sometimes. It declares we’re worthy when we know better.

Right? We know what we’ve done. Some of it is insignificant and trivial; some far more serious. It’s why confession, individual and corporate, is a spiritual discipline.

Yet in the final balance, God not only forgives our brokenness, but tells us *“You are my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* (Acts 1:8) And *“We are ambassadors for Christ, God making divine appeal through us.”* (II Cor. 5:20) And *“[Jesus said] I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.”* (John 15:15)

Today’s readings describe three messengers of God who didn’t feel worthy. And I think for those of us who don’t feel worthy—which is nearly all of us, at one time or another—it is a message of hope and God’s grace.

The first messenger is Isaiah the prophet. He begins his story *“In the year King Uzziah died....”* To modern ears it’s a throwaway line, something we gloss over. Yet King Uzziah was regarded as one of the “good” kings of Judah. The nation prospered in his reign, until he acted above the law. He tried to take over the role of the priests and burn incense in the temple (II Chronicles 26:16-22) but was confronted by 80 faithful priests who said, *“it will bring you no honor from the Lord.”* Uzziah became angry and in that moment was struck with the leprosy he carried to his death.

So when Isaiah says *“In the year King Uzziah died...”* he’s saying *“In the year of 9/11....in the year of Pearl Harbor....in the year of the Constitutional crisis....in the year my marriage ended....in the year my loved one died....in the year my world fell apart.”*

It was in **THAT** year that Isaiah had his vision: the sovereign God, the Lord on a throne, high and lofty; winged creatures attending him; the whole place shaking and filled with smoke. It’s enough to make you quake in your boots; and it was enough to make Isaiah, hearing the seraphs saying *“Holy, Holy Holy is the Lord of hosts,”* feel the depth of his

unworthiness in the presence of such holiness and glory. *“Woe is me!”* he laments. *“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!”*

Two weeks ago we had our Planning Retreat. A portion of it was a presentation on spirituality. Meg Temple asked the question, *“Where do you encounter God?”* and a number of people said, *“In nature.”* Me, too. But that experience often also comes with feeling small, insignificant, perhaps even unworthy. Looking at the stars in the sky on a clear night. I am overwhelmed at the size of the universe, it’s beauty, it’s grandeur, and feel so tiny and powerless. Yet it calls to mind Psalm 8:

*“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?*

*Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.*

Whatever sin or guilt prompted Isaiah to say *“I am a man of unclean lips”* was blotted out by God’s forgiveness. God sees worth where Isaiah saw unworthiness. Unburdened by past brokenness, Isaiah can hear God’s call *“Whom shall I send and who will go for us?”* and responds *“Send me!”*

Our second messenger is the Apostle Paul, persecutor of the Church and enabler of the martyr Stephen’s death until Christ confronted him (Acts 8 and 9). It’s a great story for anyone whose passion for truth as we understand it overwhelms love as Christ commanded it. Until his conversion, Paul—the Pharisee and lawyer—had not yet learned that *“love is the fulfilling of the law.”* (Romans 13:8-10). In today’s letter to the Church at Corinth, Paul testifies to the resurrection of Christ Jesus by telling the Corinthians the many people to whom Jesus appeared in resurrected form. He ends that testimony with *“Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.”* Scholars read this differently. Some read it as *“Paul was the last to be chosen in the playground kickball game,”* others as *“It would have been better if I hadn’t been born until Jesus appeared to me.”* Either way, the scent of unworthiness is strong.

But God uses Paul anyway, and this Pharisee-turned-evangelist brings the Gospel to *“those people:”* Gentiles outside the Abrahamic covenant! As we think about who the “other “ is and as we approach the launch of personal testimony in worship on February 23rd, I can’t think of a better example of how God can redeem us and our feelings of unworthiness if we entrust those to God.

Our last messenger in today’s scriptures is Simon. Note that Jesus does not yet called him “Peter” and Simon has not yet been called an apostle—along with the others—which does not happen in Luke’s Gospel until Chapter 6, verse 13. But what we do have is someone-Simon-who has seen Jesus’ power at work in the healing of his mother-in-law (Luke 4:38-39). In other words, the Simon in today’s Gospel knows about Jesus, is exposed to Jesus’ teaching as Jesus teaches from Simon’s boat on the Sea of Galilee, is still working in his vocation as a fisherman and is tired after a long and unproductive day at work. When Jesus finishes his teaching and says to Simon *“Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch,”* can’t you just see Simon roll his eyes and hear him sigh? I can. *“Oh, Jesus, we tried that before and it didn’t work.”* The lament of the burned-out disciple.

But here’s what’s different: Simon leaves room for that funny thing called faith I mentioned at the beginning. *“Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. **Yet if you say so**, I will let down the nets.”* I don’t know about you, but every time I’m tired in the service of God, every time Jesus’ invitation feels like a burden, every single time I feel like I don’t have the strength to get up and do what needs to be done, if I say—even in a whisper, even with reluctance—*“Jesus, if you say so....”* I find a strength I didn’t know was there and a courage and optimism I couldn’t have imagined.

And “couldn’t have imagined” about sums it up, right? Simon and his crew dropped the nets and there were so many fish that the nets started to break. Partners came and they still couldn’t hold the catch. The boats began to sink and Simon, overwhelmed by this outpouring of undeserved blessing declares *“Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.”*

That’s the thing about blessings. They are blessings precisely because they are undeserved. And in this Western, American, capitalistic culture, where everything is measured by our production and output and success, many of us have a hard time with blessings. So, along with Simon,

we sometimes distance ourselves from the very source of blessings precisely because we don't feel worthy of them. A bit nutty, right? But it's what some of us do.

But Jesus gets to the heart of the matter. He tells Simon *"Do not be afraid."* Audience participation time: how many times does the phrase "fear not" or "do not be afraid" appear in the Bible? [pause for comment]. 365. Right: once a day, every day, all year long. And for the sassy who says *"What about leap years?"* I say *"I'll assign you every passage that says "Do not be afraid" to read on February 29, 2028."*

In the end, Jesus simply calls Simon and the others to the ministry of all disciples: *"Do not be afraid: from now on you will be catching people."*

So we sometimes feel unworthy because of our sin, our brokenness, our inability to accept God's forgiveness, God's love freely given and God's blessings. And God keeps giving them anyway because, as both Peter and Paul declare in their own testimonies, quoting Joel 2:32, *"Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."* (Acts 2:21, Romans 10:13)

Recently someone asked me if something I said in a message was meant for them. I answered this way: *"I have not intentionally preached to an individual, with their name in mind, in close to a half-century of ministry. But individuals do share their triumphs and tragedies with me. If my finite and imperfect words have application in your life and reveal God's redemption, to God be the glory."*

You and I are forgiven: God says so.

You and I are worthy: God says so.

You and I need not be afraid: God says so.

You and I are called to serve. God continues to offer that call. Let us hear, accept that we are accepted, worthy because God made us and forgives our imperfections, and be unafraid to launch out into the deep to share the Good News of God's love in Jesus. Amen.