

**“GONE...FISHING”**  
**Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11**  
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Gone fishing. This phrase is often used to denote the idea that someone is on a vacation or enjoying a one-day sabbatical from work in order to spend a day at the lakeshore or on a boat. Today I want us to explore the idea that we can take this commonplace phrase and think of it as more than an invitation to relaxation. Instead, this phrase can be a reminder of our own individual calls of service to and for the gospel of Jesus Christ. I want this phrase to invoke in us the thought that we are evangelists. I want to transform this statement of tranquility and allow it to shake us about so that we recognize something new in the way that we are called.

First, let's concentrate on "gone." We find our way to "gone" in our passage from Isaiah, which details Isaiah's "call" story. While this passage is about how Isaiah came to understand himself as "called," it is more correctly a look at the holiness and the fullness of God, a reality that results in Isaiah's call. We often think of this passage as our "call" story; and it is, after all, a primary text used for ordinations and installations—mine included. But the anointing of Isaiah, and anyone else as a messenger, prophet, preacher, or teacher, is ultimately God's story because our "call" originates not in us, but in God. It may seem odd to parse the passage in this way, but it is important since Isaiah's own words describe just how unworthy he really is to be called into God's service. "I am a man of unclean lips and I live among people with unclean lips": this is Isaiah's confession. And, if not for God, Isaiah's story might just end there. But just like in our own worship service, confession is met with an assurance of pardon and with the promise of God's grace. And that is precisely what the seraphs provide when they touch Isaiah's lips with the hot coals from the fire. But, rather than being burned by the coals, Isaiah is instead sanctified, and then the reality of God begins to set in for Isaiah.<sup>1</sup> And as Isaiah begins to comprehend that even in his humbled and sinful state he is enough, then, and only then, can he answer God's call.

Let's put the mythic and magical aside and forget about the six-winged seraphs for a moment and remember that in this story God makes it possible for Isaiah to comprehend his "call." And then, as Isaiah begins to comprehend his "call" we, like Isaiah, can begin to grasp that we too can be called. Our ability to join Isaiah and say, "Send me," is made possible when we announce "Holy, Holy, Holy—this whole earth is full of your glory!" And then our excuses: we are too broken, too busy, too sinful, too. . . whatever—those excuses are gone. And when we recognize this, the barriers to accepting our holiness are gone too. And then we can truly accept not just our holiness but also our wholeness and truly know the fullness of what God is calling us toward. The mere fact that Isaiah can say, "Send me," is testimony to the potency of God's never-ending grace. When Isaiah says, "Send me," he is created anew, and everything else is "gone"!

But there is still the fishing, and another "call" story. In our gospel reading, we hear the story of Jesus calling Simon, James, and John. This story begins with the crowds

wanting desperately to hear Jesus and, interestingly, he runs from the crowd. But not too far! Jesus simply retreats to Simon's boat and from there he teaches and tells all who would hear the stories of God. And then he turns to his hosts and invites them to take him fishing! Now, these are working boats, and captained by working men whose take has been light of late, and I suspect that they were less than pleased when Jesus commandeered their boat as a stage and probably even less pleased when he demanded that they take him fishing. Yet they answer so nicely, "We have worked all night long and caught nothing but, if you say, we will put down our nets." I suspect that we miss a lot of their grumbling tone here, but they do as he asks. And soon their nets are being weighed down by too many fish. Their nets are so heavy that they had to bring in another boat to help. I can picture their nets almost breaking and the boat almost capsizing like that climactic scene in the film *Finding Nemo*. But they escape danger, and return to shore with what must have been a record catch. It was so big that Simon Peter, overwhelmed by the experience, pronounces himself unworthy to be in the presence of Jesus. And Jesus lets him off the hook, if you'll pardon the pun, and tells him that he will now fish for people. And with that they leave their boats. Undoubtedly, they do not understand what Jesus is talking about, but glad to be free from their nets and the rough seas.

I've always been confused by this passage because there is something seemingly coercive about evangelism if it is done via a net. "I caught'em, pulled them from their homes, and wrestled them into the church!" Is this really the evangelism model we want? Certainly there are evangelism models of this sort, but this is not what Jesus calls us to, is it? I think the fishing metaphor can be salvaged if we think of it in this way: "The ministry of Jesus provides us a model such that we can cast the net of God's love all around, we can open it to all the world, and then wait with patience for the Spirit to work; to see if any are caught by God's vision and grace."<sup>2</sup> Perhaps in sending us fishing for people, God is challenging us to get outside our own circle—in the same way that Jesus began his ministry not in Jerusalem, where one might expect, but in Galilee, "where Jew and non-Jew lived side by side. Jesus modeled a ministry of fishing, with a net of love flung as wide as the world itself; and our challenge is to follow and to keep throwing that net."<sup>3</sup> Of course it is hard and awkward, painful even, to keep casting the net out there and just keep waiting, but that too is our task. Because just as Isaiah's "call" wasn't really about Isaiah, neither is our evangelism task about us. Evangelism is a task for the spirit, but we are the conduit through which the spirit does its work. And so our task is to keep casting our net—keep proclaiming God's love and Christ's peace in our relationships, our work, our politics, and our stewardship. Keep fishing in everything that we do, and then the spirit will transform our actions into ministry. It is often said "Preach the gospel...use words if necessary!" All that would hinder us is gone, but the fishing and the living remain!

Thanks be to God! Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Craddock, Hayes, et al., *Preaching Through the Christian Year, Year C*; Trinity Press International, Harrisburg, PA., 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Svenningsen, Ann, quoted by Huey, Kate,  
<http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/february-7-2010.html>,  
accessed on February 4, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Huey, Kate, <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/february-7-2010.html>, accessed  
on February 4, 2010.