

“Too Close for Comfort”  
February 6, 2022

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

I like those stories about the followers of Jesus and the fish the —such as the one from Luke that we just heard.

All four Gospels tell one version or another of this story. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell it as a story about the call of the disciples at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. John tells it as story of resurrection at the end of that Gospel.

I preached from John’s version last year after Easter, telling you:

The “Yes,” of the resurrection is given to those who will look again at their lives and their world and see the new, previously unconsidered and untried possibilities.

The “Yes” of the resurrection is given to those who will take on the mental, physical, and especially the spiritual work of trying the “other side of the boat”—building into the future rather than futilely trying to rebuild the past.

I’ve preached on this incident so often and with such enthusiasm—because it is a great story about second chances, about trying again, and trying something new. It’s especially encouraging in these days.

As I read this story again in recent weeks, however, I was struck by something I often overlooked in those other, upbeat sermons: An encounter with Jesus is not necessarily pleasant. Even an experience of the One who says, “Try again” has its drawbacks.

Listening in these new days, I remembered that scripture warns us: “It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

As the Gospel of John tells the story, after hauling in that great catch of fish, Peter jumps into the water and joyfully runs toward Jesus, who is waiting on the shore.

In Luke’s account. Peter doesn’t rejoice. He doesn’t leave his nets and immediately follow Jesus.

No.

He falls down before Jesus and cries: “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”

Jesus is too close for comfort.

“Woe is me,” Isaiah cries in the temple. “I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell among a people of unclean lips.” Like Peter centuries later, the prophet speaks not of moral inferiority but of the pervasive human separation from the divine. There is no particular lapse involved here, just a deep sense of “missing the mark”—which is the phrase used in the New Testament that we translate

“sin.”

To come into God’s presence is to become keenly aware of the distance between ourselves and the holy. We—all of us—routinely fail to hit the bull’s eye.

For all of us, the arrow flies pretty wide of the target. Social media make this clear quite often. And a look at our own lives each day shows just how close we are to Isaiah and Peter.

Of course, that’s good news because it means that when we gather in a place like this, we come together on common ground. So when someone says, “The church is full of hypocrites,” we can smile and respond by saying “Sure, but we’re always willing to scoot over to make room for one more.”

It’s like the story of the man who was looking for a church to attend. He entered one in which the congregation was reading together from a prayer book: “We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.” The man dropped into a seat and sighed with relief as he said to himself: “Thank goodness, I’ve found my crowd at last.”

It is good, isn’t it, when we find a crowd like—well, like this one.

Yes, there is good news here. God’s favor is not granted on the basis of your perception of your worth as a person. God’s favor is not granted on the basis of your superior virtue.

God loves.

God forgives, bridging the gap between the human and the holy. Sometimes forgiveness can feel like a burning hot coal. It touches the very heart of who you are, leaving you a different person—not necessarily better, but forgiven—and that’s a good starting point.

So, maybe we can come a little closer.

Instead of calling it quits, God chooses forgiveness. It’s amazing, really, isn’t it? But then, as John Calvin said: “To walk rightly in the Word of God is never to cease to be amazed.”

An encounter with the living God has its drawbacks. Forgiveness burns, but it also heals.

Are we “good enough?”

I don’t know.

Probably not.

Scripture suggests that it doesn’t really matter; that’s not really the issue. No amount of self-esteem is a substitute for the forgiving love that God offers. And no amount of self-justification is necessary to receive that love.

Sometimes we need to be reminded, we need to hear words like "In Jesus Christ you are forgiven." But forgiveness goes beyond words. It is a call to a new life. Forgiveness is a call to service in the name of Christ.

So, Jesus speaks to Peter, saying those words that are found throughout scripture: "Do not be afraid." Stop shaking in your fishing boots.

Note that Jesus doesn't add, "Your sins are forgiven," which we might expect, given Peter's concern. But that doesn't seem to be the concern of Jesus.

Instead, Jesus says: "From now on you will be catching people."

Along with the burning coal of forgiveness, a commission comes as well. We don't stay in the church thanking God. We are sent out to let other people know by our words and actions that what they hope is true: God is love. God does forgive and set free.

Isaiah in the temple.

Peter, James, and John by the Sea of Galilee.

They illustrate what countless Congregationalists have discovered: there is no forgiveness without a consequent sending.

The mission of this congregation, then, is not something handled by a committee meeting once a month; it's not something set up to take our money away from us. The mission of this congregation is our response as a gathered people to the forgiving love of God that fills our hearts with generosity and strengthens our arms for service.

Try once more.

Do not be afraid.

And they left everything—even their reluctance—and followed. Perhaps they tried to follow at a "safe" distance. We try to do that at times, knowing just how uncomfortable following in the way of Jesus Christ can be.

We follow Jesus and find ourselves going to the places where he goes. With him we meet the people he meets. Those places, those people often turn out to be nothing like what we know or what we would expect.

There is no safe distance for those who follow. The forgiving God made known in Jesus can be too close for comfort.

So we need each other, don't we?

Together, let us continue to follow.

Let us continue to follow together.