

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

St. John's Presbyterian Church  
Devon, Pennsylvania  
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Transfiguration Sunday  
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## Wow!

I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. *Isaiah 1:1b*

Simon answered, "Master, we have been working all night long but have caught nothing.  
yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."

When they had done this, they caught so many fish that the nets were beginning to break. *Luke 5:5-6*

Today is Transfiguration Sunday which remembers when Jesus' appearance, like Moses fifteen hundred years before, was transfigured on a mountaintop, his countenance shining like sunlight on fresh snow. It is a day in which the Bible challenges us to remember that we, too, are not only capable of being changed, wholly transformed, but that we are called to be nothing less than God to the world. Indeed, as the psalmist says very plainly, "You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you" (Psalm 82:6). But rather than focus on what happened to Jesus on that day, when God essentially credentialed Jesus in relative privacy, I'd like us to look at Jesus quite publically passing on those same credentials to his first disciples, which means, thereby—to us. It's a story about ordinary people coming face to face with their limits, and giving up. And what happens when we think we have nothing else to give, but take time to be obedient when God calls.

It is morning, and a weary Simon Peter, James and John have pulled the prow of their lumbering fishing boats a few feet up the strand. We know precisely the appearance of such boats. A fishing vessel, twenty-three feet long and 2,000 years old was excavated from the mud of Lake Galilee just a few years ago. Peter and his comrades now are waist deep in the water, cleaning the nets. There were only a few holes to mend, after all they had caught nothing all night. They drape the nets over the boat's rail to dry. Jesus, who's been teaching a crowd close by, climbs into Peter's boat, and standing on a thwart with one arm hooked around the mast, he turns to Peter (Peter is us, by the way) and asks him to take the boat out one more time. You can feel Peter's bone weariness. You can feel the pause. Peter knows Jesus. They live in the same village, Capernaum by the lake. And just a short time before, Jesus had performed his first miracle in Luke's Gospel, healing Peter's mother-in-law of a fever. For Peter, it must feel like payback time. Oh, not now, Jesus, have a heart! —"Master, we've been out there all night and caught nothing!" He looks at the master, perhaps catching in Jesus' eyes an arresting silence and, was that the barest hint of a smile, a secret knowing? *Something* passes between them. Wordsworth comes to mind—"A presence that disturbs me with a joy . . . . A motion and a spirit, that impels . . . .Therefore am I still."

"If you say so," says Peter. He's wretchedly tired, but drags the small anchor out of the sand, and as it clatters into the bow sets his shoulder against the hulk and pushes the boat into that begrudging sea, once more to cast the nets that they had just laboriously cleaned, mended, and laboriously folded. It's another invitation into impenetrable depths. Like much of life when it gets too cluttered with weariness, life sends us into impenetrable depths, when all the while we yearn for the predictable and routine, a good meal, one's own bed, and an unencumbered sleep. Still, Peter obeys. Perhaps he looks at the crowd now dribbling away, that earlier flocked to Jesus for some nourishment of soul, like children hungering for manna in the wilderness. They know he has something unearthly and uncommon. And they trust him, even if it's for their own ends. Peter has seen that, too. He is moved to trust Jesus at his word—which is precisely what faith is.

In an ironic moment, Peter, the fisherman, has just taken the bait—the good bait. It isn't a bait that's about to end his life, as with all the fish he catches. It is about to change it forever. Rather, catching people brings them alive, and when that life is given away it grows. Just like the bread at the feeding of the multitude. At the very moment of saying "OK, whatever you say," Peter is hooked.

When our oldest daughter, Carolyn, was a producer with National Geographic Channel, one of her projects was a popular series about big game fishing around the world, called "Hooked." So she came up with a thirty second promotional piece for the network. The first thing you see is, in a sense, smoky amorphous nothing, then it morphs into a milky grey surface of water somewhere—no horizon, no apparent sky, as though sitting in a boat in the misty still of early morning on a lake. Then "plop!" A fishing float hits the surface sending out concentric ripples before all is still again. All you see is the float, and the slack fishing line arcing into the mist. A pause. The float bobbles a fraction—once, twice. Another pause. Then in a flash the float rips across the water, before plunging straight down. *Hooked!*

Forgive the brief moment of nepotism, but it reminds me of Peter's experience. The long night. Mist on the lake in the early morning. The numbing tiredness after not a single adrenalin rush from a catch. Then one solitary nudge from Jesus. Jesus isn't hard to ignore when you're not face to face. But Peter is faced with a different intimacy, sitting in the boat with him. So out they go again for one last cast. And then . . . !

After the catch is hauled in, the nets groaning to the limit such that both boats are needed, Peter finds himself face to face with a presence so frighteningly powerful that he shakes at the contrast with his own self. This is a huge stretch from the healing of his mother-in-law. He can barely control himself. "Get away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." It might seem to us an odd response, especially under these conditions, but sin, literally "missing the mark," was not viewed, in Jesus' day, primarily as a moral transgression. Sin was human distance from God. This is what Isaiah feels in our Old Testament lesson. The prophet has a vision of God in the temple so profound, and God is so vast that merely the *hem* of God's train fills the temple. Isaiah is terrified to have come so close to Almighty God and still be alive. That's Peter's feeling, too.

Now Jesus tells Peter that he is no longer going to be catching fish but hooking people for God. Then an extraordinary thing happens. Peter and his companions have just had the biggest catch of their lives, with who knows what net value (pardon the pun) to their families. They have been fishermen all their lives, which, in that day, was not a profession of the impoverished poor, but, along with small landholding farmers fishermen constituted a middle class. They developed a whole industry for curing, salting, distribution and sales. Fish was the most commonly eaten meat throughout Palestine, and because the much larger Dead Sea had no fish, along with costal fishermen on the Mediterranean Galilee was a major source of product, as we like to call it. Mary Magdalene's name means "Mary of the fish tower." So she, too, was likely connected to this industry, and probably a supporter of some means for Jesus' entourage, which was substantial, and with the independence to travel among his followers. Yet—and here's the clincher, when Jesus says to Peter, and implicitly to his partners, James and John, "I've got a different job for you—catching people," they walk away from being fishermen, and from their lives up to that point. They just—*walk away!* That's the power of Jesus' impact. And that's the message of this story.

Let's go back to a statement we made at the outset, that this is first a story about ordinary people coming face to face their limits, and giving up. Then about what happens when we think we have nothing else to give, but are willing to act in faith. Their limits were—no fish, no immediate prospects, and complete helplessness to change anything themselves. They were powerless. Jesus, by stunning contrast is powerful beyond imagining, and eager beyond measure to share his power with us.

That tiny leap of halting faith that Peter takes when he says, "If you say so, Lord," becomes absolutely transformative. When faith becomes what we *do*, not merely what we think or feel, we change a piece of the world. Faith seldom sees the consequence of its action in that moment. Certainly, in Peter's case, he had not the slightest hint of the consequence of, "If you say so, Lord." I suspect that God prefers it that way. But the world manifestly changed because of what he began.

Now, the big question is, what have you been putting off in your life? There are some among us who have been toying with an idea, but have yet to claim it. It may be a radical change in your profession or work. Perhaps a lingering “What if . . . ?” What lifelong passion do you have that you never really explored. Perhaps there are some among us who felt the first intimations of a call into Christian ministry at some point, but never cracked the door open, or having looked in never walked through that door long enough to see. Perhaps you have a sense that you need to be or do something else, yet were never clear what that might be. Well, explore it. Pray, then act. Remember the shell that Stephanie spoke about this morning. How, as hermit crab (for instance) grows, it has to find a bigger home. If you really want to be a follower of Jesus, it’s time to get a bigger shell.

What are you doing consciously for God? Are you willing to trust God into the unknown, setting aside every human weighing of the options and consequences, what Wordsworth again, called our “nicely calculated less or more.” And take the route that says, “If you say so, Lord.” Then watch what happens.

*Wow . . . !*

Amen.