

## **“BOLD NEW BEGINNINGS”**

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Isaiah 6:1-8, (9-13) · Psalm 138 · 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 · Luke 5:1-11

The texts for these weeks following Epiphany continue to offer us glimpses into moments of epiphany in the lives of God's people. Today's texts bring us accounts of a prophet and of two disciples responding to a call. In the gospel Jesus calls his first disciples - a couple of fishermen! The Old Testament reading details the Lord's call to Isaiah; and in the Corinthians passage, Paul reflects on his encounter with the risen Christ and his own call to discipleship.

We tend to view being called as something of a noble thing, particularly when it involves some altruistic cause. But it can also be deeply unsettling -- especially when we view ourselves as being unworthy and lacking the requisite skills to take on the challenge.

All three of the subjects in our readings feel this way. Isaiah speaks of unclean lips, and only the searing of his lips with a coal from the altar erases his sense of inadequacy. Peter falls on his knees in fear, but Jesus' words seem to evaporate his fear and he gets up and follows immediately. Perhaps Paul has the hardest call of all . . . from persecuting and stoning Christians, he does a “180” and becomes a martyr himself.

Being willing to answer God's call requires the courage and the boldness to make radical changes in our lives by wading into difficult and unfamiliar waters. This is quite a contrast from the typical behavior of our lives, in which we often tread carefully to avoid unnecessary conflict. We see this trait writ large in our political leaders, who seem unable to set aside their narrow partisan interests and address big problems with any sort of vision that goes beyond the next election. They have come to understand that to risk offending voters or powerful special interests often leads to election night losses.

But we cannot point the finger ourselves with impunity, for it is also very characteristic of our own personal and congregational lives. Are we willing to open ourselves up to the radical changes that might be in store for us if we answer God's call? We fear that following up our noble words with actions might prove to be unpopular or painful – or that we might appear foolish. A call from God is often an invitation to a radical change of life. Bold new beginnings characterize the stories of Isaiah, the disciples Simon, James, and John, and Saul of Tarsus, as God summons each of them to break with the old and embrace new, fuller life.

In each story, and perhaps in our own lives and the life of this congregation, God's call to discipleship invites boldness. And yet, we are more comfortable with modest change and small steps. How can we listen to God, and follow as disciples and leaders in our own spheres, in a world where we're accustomed more to the slow and tiny than to the grand and new?

Perhaps our Psalm offers the answer. In verse 3, the Psalmist proclaims,

On the day I called, you answered me,

you increased my strength of soul . . . *you increased my strength of soul.*

It is the Spirit that gives us courage, and it is often given only when we cry out in awe or desperation – or when we are silent long enough to listen for the answer. So it was with Saint AuGUSTine:

Centuries after Peter's encounter with Jesus, AuGUSTine, a pampered Roman nobleman, encountered the carpenter of Nazareth in the quiet luxury of a walled garden, and would write about that encounter: "I was mad for health, and dying for life; knowing what evil thing I was, and not knowing what good thing I was shortly to become... I was greatly disturbed in spirit...."

AuGUSTine goes on to tell how he heard a faint voice, like that of a child, telling him to "take and read." He picked up a Bible and opened it to Romans 13:13: "Let us live honorably, as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."

These were compelling words for a jaded playboy like Augustine. He continues: "I wanted to read no further, nor did I need to. For instantly, as the sentence ended, there was infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty and all the gloom of doubt vanished away."

There are other examples in the secular world — people being called to radical change in their lives, as they seek to be leaders and transformers of society, not simply followers.

In 1983, Apple Computer founder Steve Jobs realized that the company had grown too large for him to manage. He was a computer designer and a creative entrepreneur, but he didn't know much about leading a large corporation. So he began a search for a seasoned executive to come in and manage Apple's daily operations.

He turned to a man named John Scully, who by 1983 had become a senior vice president at Pepsi. Scully was in charge of Pepsi's worldwide marketing, and everyone expected him to rise even higher. At the time he agreed to have dinner with Steve Jobs, he wasn't looking to leave Pepsi. Why would he leave the fast track headed toward senior leadership in a Fortune 500 company to take a smaller salary and move to assume full responsibility for an upstart, west coast computer company?

Over dinner, Scully laid out for Jobs all the reasons he had decided not to leave Pepsi. Steve Jobs refuted not a single one of his points. He just leaned across the table and said, "John, what are you doing with your life? Are you going to spend it making colored sugar water, or are you going to come to Apple Computer and change the world?"

Scully later said that the moment he heard those words, he knew he would leave Pepsi and go to Apple. He had a challenge before him: to change the world!

Nations, too, can turn a corner and change their policies and actions. The countries of Haiti and the Dominican Republic share an island and some real similarities in history, yet they could not be more different. Even when both nations were ruled by dictators, the tactics

produced long-term differences in each country. Haiti has been ecologically stripped and is incredibly poor, while the Dominican Republic is doing fairly well with tourism and an export economy. The Dominican Republic is very careful about its contact with Haiti; it tries to keep its border closed, and has historically done little to help its neighbor when hurricanes have devastated Haiti.

Yet, in a move of bold leadership, the president of the Dominican Republic has opened up the border and the country's hospitals, and has pledged to assist in the rebuilding of Haiti following this most devastating earthquake. It is a move that has caught native Haitians who live in the Dominican Republic by surprise -- a pleasant surprise, but quite a surprise nonetheless.

Can we, as the Church, even as this congregation in this time and place, can we follow God's call with vision and energy? The Church in general is too well known for the Seven Last Words . . . “We never did it that way before.” It is sometimes difficult to put aside long-standing quarrels and turf battles — not that I've noticed anything like that here in this congregation! But when it does occur, energy leaks away from the vision into the work of maintaining the building and the budget.

If we can follow Jesus when he invites us to do things differently, and in turn, invite others to live, serve, and minister in ways that are new to them, perhaps we can provide the kind of discipleship and leadership that is needed in a world where the church is changing faster than we can keep up with it. One person has observed, "We live in a time when the old ways of being and doing church no longer communicate the faith effectively. The old answers do not work anymore. In fact, many of the old questions are not even being asked anymore."<sup>ii</sup> Like Isaiah, Paul, Simon Peter, James, and John, we are being invited to boldness of faith in an extraordinary time. Can a medium-sized congregation in a historic town become a catalyst for change in the community? Are we willing to risk failure for the sake of the Gospel, in order to grow and learn as a church? If we grow, are we ready for the people who will offer new ideas to the Session and Deacons? Are we ready to welcome the new volunteers who come with different ideas for the church?

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What an unlikely choice Peter was for an evangelist! A common fisherman, untutored in the fine points of scripture, big, ungainly, and ragged of dress. The crown of his head was likely balding, and what little hair he had left was going gray. He was too old for this, many would say. And besides, he smelled of fish.

Simon Peter is a rough and even uncouth person. He's clumsy, impulsive, unrefined. When his temper gets the better of him, he can curse a blue streak. He probably knows the inside of every seedy waterfront tavern in Galilee.

Yet it is this man -- not some brilliant rabbinical student or pious Pharisee -- whom Jesus calls to join him in "fishing for people." Responding to that call, Peter lays aside every worldly accomplishment and success, and sets off with the carpenter on a quixotic journey across the hills and dales of Galilee and Judea. He is part of the small band who began a movement

that has become one of the great religions of the world.

Picture others – Martin Luther King Jr. leading the march in Selma, Moses leading the people in the wilderness, Joshua leading the people around the city of Jericho, Martin Luther nailing his theses to the door of the Wittenburg church. We are part of a grand tradition of the unlikely, called to do the impossible, but all with the help of God. If we allow fear to hinder us, our nets will remain empty. I believe it is time for this congregation to go into the difficult and unfamiliar waters. But we will not go alone.

Let us pray:

Come among us, Jesus,  
You whom the angels worship  
and children welcome.

Come among us, Jesus,  
You who hurled the stars into space  
and shaped the spider’s weaving.

Come among us, Jesus,  
You who walked the long road to Bethlehem  
and lit a flame that dances forever.

Come among us, Jesus,  
You who broke bread and blessed wine  
and gave life to the world.

Come, Jesus, and meet us here.  
Be Known to Us in the Breaking of Bread.  
And increase our strength of soul. Amen.

## **ENDNOTES**

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- i. from *Confessions of St. Augustine*, as quoted in *The Immediate Word*.
  - ii. Jeffery D. Jones, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 1, p. 327.