

**“You’re NOT Isaiah or Peter, but Y’all are Called” based on Luke 5:1-11 and Isaiah 6:1-8  
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on February 6, 2022, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

In today’s readings, the Prophet Isaiah and the Apostle Simon Peter both encounter the presence of God and for each of them, it is a humbling and terrifying experience that exposes their sins. And for each of them, it sends them on their way to live into God’s calling. This experience which humbled them, also empowered them.

Each of you participating in this service now, has a calling from God, just like Peter and Isaiah. I really believe this, and it’s why I say it to you almost every week in our welcome time. Yet, I do not believe that we are all destined to get this call directly from God in a vision like the one Isaiah experiences, or even a miracle like Peter saw. Still, in those times when I may experience doubt, I long for a vision. I hope for a miracle, and I imagine that all would be well, if I just had some concrete certainty to be sure.

Yesterday morning, unprompted, after throwing up a second time, Harrison prayed. It warmed my heart to see him turn to prayer asking that he would not throw up again, so that he would feel better and not miss out on a party he was invited to. His hands folded and his direct address, ‘Dear Jesus,’ was precious. But my heart broke a few minutes later, when he threw up again and afterward, he said, ‘I guess I’m not going to the party. I think I did the prayer wrong. My eyes were open.’

This is not something I’ve taught him for sure. But it goes to show how we think, he thought he did something wrong when the prayer was not answered. Hence, he thought it was that he kept his eyes open. I assured him that his prayer was perfect, and that he had done nothing wrong. I told him that we had already decided after he first threw up, that he couldn’t go. But I said to him that I was praying the same prayer too that he would stop throwing up, but that I didn’t know why God was not responding in that moment, except that I believed God had a reason and was answering us, even if it seemed we couldn’t see how.

That’s really hard – I thought to myself, *‘God, if ever there was a time to be my magician, I think it would have done a lot to build the faith of my son if you just acted as I asked you to.’* Oh, how I prayed in that moment for instant healing, a certain sign, even though I knew that Harrison would be totally fine and back to normal. He was by dinner. Yet it seemed to me, that this was God’s chance. This was God’s opportunity to give my son some proof, and perhaps give me some credibility with him. Instead, all I could do was love my son, hold him, and comfort him.

I find it interesting that each of the gospels includes a story of the calling of Peter, but each one tells the story a little differently, with Luke’s being the most complete. It’s the longest version since it is the one that includes the story of this miraculous catch of fish. It might be easy for us to wonder why Matthew and Mark missed this. Scripture says Matthew was a disciple, and tradition says, that Mark’s main source was Peter, so how did they miss it?

I think the answer is in how Luke portrays the event. The miracle did not matter to Simon Peter. This struggling fisherman who fished all night and then got the catch of a lifetime, and he left

all the fish. Peter humbly knew he was a sinner, and yet this Jesus was now calling him, and Jesus empowered him to do things far greater.

For Luke and all the gospel writers, the miracle itself was not and is not the point. From my rational modern perspective, I can honestly say: I struggle to think this way. I want this to be about the miracle and how it gave Peter proof to follow Jesus. Otherwise, how was it a miracle? I want to think that in this skeptical world, my faith is not a strange thing and for people to believe as I believe. I think that if everyone else just saw a miracle like this, they'd believe too.

But the truth is, miracles do not build faith, they can even undermine it with a kind of certainty. Often the proof that gives one person full assurance and unassailable certainty, still does not prove anything to others. Look at the battles of 'proof' in our public arena today and the power of skepticism to undermine even the most reasoned and basic arguments.

If Jesus returned tomorrow on a cloud, standing 500 feet tall, walking around the world, even walking across the oceans, some might believe, but still others would explain it away – it's aliens, or technology from China, a mass hallucination. Now, that's not how Scripture portrays his return, but I think you can get my point here. Even some unassailable proof, garners nonstop skepticism from self-made experts.

If Harrison had miraculously stopped throwing up, and perked up instantly, surely it would have been a beautiful testimony, but still dismissed by many, and sadly, it's possible he would even dismiss it himself at a later age. And if I'm honest, I believe skepticism is good, but only if it is balanced with humility.

Notice that in both of these call stories, humility leads the way, and the proof is not in the fabulous success of the called – Isaiah preaches to a people who reject him as he is preparing them for exile, and Peter messes up a bunch of times along the way and he will eventually be crucified in Rome. No, the proof is in their faithful response.

In the 1820s, there was a woman who was enslaved to work on the farm of Dutch settlers in New York. She told a story about how she wanted to pray, but felt unworthy and struggled to speak, concerned she would lie to God. But then a space opened up between her and God and she sensed a presence, someone who could speak for her to God and yet also know all about her. She said to this being, *'You seem perfectly familiar. I feel that you not only love me, but that you always have...I know you. I know you. Who are you?'* She said that after saying this she struggled in her soul and in her body with desire, fighting against it so intensely that she struggled to breath and had lost all her strength, and when she could no longer fight, the answer came to her, 'It is Jesus.'

This is the story of Isabella Baumfree, who afterward changed her name, and became known as 'Sojourner Truth,' who answered a call to travel this country and tell of its sins. She was an advocate for the end of slavery, for the aid and help that the poor so desperately needed, and for women's rights, and did so, she believed, on a mission from God. Now, I know that many, even those who portray truth as an icon, will doubt her call story and her vision. Some might

say she needed such a story to have credibility, so she made it up. Others will say maybe she just had a vision brought on by a lack of food.

But whatever they say to discredit her experience, I want you to know the vision here, the miracle, which I do believe was authentic, is not the point. It was her faithful response, even when persecuted, even if, as Peter did often, she may have struggled to get things right, and even when she was tired and worn out, and even if everyone told her she was wrong, she continued to answer God's call.

Likewise, an Albanian woman 125 years later had a vision of Christ while serving in India. She had visions for more than a year from September 10, 1946 to December 3, 1947. In those visions, she said that Jesus called her to radiate his love in India, not through immigrants like herself, but from among the Indian people, with nuns from India who could empathize with their neighbors, and convey God's love, just as they had received God's love.

Of course, this one was probably easier to guess. The Albanian woman is Mother Teresa, but what's interesting is that afterward, after the visions ended, she felt spiritually dry and a terrible darkness about her. Yet she remained faithful to what Jesus had asked her to do in these visions. Even when she struggled to believe, she continued to serve.

I'll never forget an interview I heard with a priest who had been close with her, and he said that the visions gave her so much certainty, she no longer had faith, and that it was the darkness and dryness that restored her faith in the end. Like Sojourner Truth, there are many who doubt Mother Teresa's visions too, but her faithful response is something that cannot be doubted. The proof of God for Sojourner Truth and Mother Teresa ultimately, was not in the visions that they had, but in the work that they did in response.

The experience that humbled Peter and Isaiah is what empowered them. The experience that humbled Sojourner Truth and Mother Teresa empowered them as well. But as I said in the beginning, few of us, if any, will have experiences like this. However, we can all identify with Simon Peter in the boat. He's exhausted. We know that feeling. He's a fisherman, Jesus is a teacher, they each know their craft. Simon Peter let's Jesus use the boat to preach from, but he's cleaning his nets, getting ready to go home. They've been out all night and caught nothing.

This is when Jesus asks him to try one more time – cast out the nets for a catch in the deep. He says 'Master,' using a generic term for an authority figure, like a teacher or a commander, and he tells Jesus that it's pointless, but because he asked, he'll do it anyway.

How often do we feel like doing the right thing in life is pointless? It's not going to matter. I can do it, but they won't change. That problem will still exist. How often do we doubt whether what we do makes a difference? Yet, like Simon Peter, who felt that way in that moment, we have an opportunity to respond, even if we think we know better, or even if we doubt.

When we do, Jesus moves from being a generic authority figure, such as teacher in our lives, and we can begin to see him as Lord, our God and our brother, who shared in our humanity, to live as we live, and who would eventually let sin and death do its worst to him. He died on the

cross for us, so that he could rise to new life for us as well, preparing us to be temples of the Holy Spirit to pour love in our hearts so we can pour that love out to others around us.

I have always loved the turn of phrase in most translations of making those who fish into fishers of people. But what is interesting here again is that Mark uses this language, but Luke uses different words in his account. Luke, who was likely a native Greek speaker, does not say 'fishers of people.' He uses a term that means to catch and release alive. It's a word that means to be captured or captivated and released to new life.

In Luke's gospel the Holy Spirit is always at work, acting in the story. And it is the Spirit that moved those fish into the nets, and it is the Spirit that puts people in our lives, for us to captivate with the good news of Jesus and his love for us and release them back to do the same. It wasn't fishing, for us to think of catching and consuming or eating the fish. That's the standard word which Mark uses. This is a word for catching alive and releasing.

And so, my sisters and brothers, this is our calling. Notice that in Luke's account, the point he is trying to make doesn't require Jesus to speak directly to James and John. They didn't need to be in Peter's boat. They were witnesses to God's love in the world, God's action in the world from afar, and responded to it. They were not the ones directly receiving the miracle.

We may not have direct encounters like Peter or Isaiah, but we are witnesses. We witness God's love when we study scripture, especially in community. This is why Sunday School and bible studies are important. We witness God's love when we pray, especially together and for each other. We witness God's love when we serve together. And this is the miracle that will capture people and help them to see God's love at work in us and at work in them.

I believe in miracles. I do. I believe both those in scripture and miracles that are still happening today. But as with Harrison, miracles are no substitute for loving someone, for comforting them, for caring for them, and enduring with them, bearing with them in what they are going through. This love is what conveys God's presence to others.

When we are humble enough to do this – whether it is because we have been humbled by something in our lives or humbled by the pain that we see in someone we love – we admit our sins and turn to God. When we trust that no matter what we have done, God's love is still for us, then we are empowered to love God and love others as God has loved us. I want you to know that no matter what you have done in your life, God loves you and wants you to know.

God wants you to hold this miraculous love in your hearts and share it with others. This love is to empower us to change the world, even when you think you are not worthy. I look out each week and see a congregation in masks and I know we have mask fatigue, but to do this as part of a community whether you believe 'proof' that masks work or believe 'proof' they do not, is faithfulness. To do this as a community says a lot to those who see it. When we do things even when they are hard, that is how we show love and that can be a far greater sign of the gospel than those miracles we think will just prove everything we believe is true. Amen.