February 4, 2007 **Luke 5:1-11**

"Jesus the Fisher"

Experiencing God's presence in our life … faced with God … having the deep sense that God in some way is making Himself known in our life … what happens to us … what is our response … our reaction when God bumps up against us? To help us form our answers, we have two personal examples from today's lessons in Isaiah and Luke. Isaiah's experience comes in the form of a vision. Despite our efforts to interpret Isaiah's vision, be it literally or allegorically, (*it actually doesn't matter*!) … what is significant for us is the fact that the vision was real to Isaiah … so real that the vision changed his life.

The whole quality of Isaiah's experience of the Holy is one of awe. Therefore, his vision conveys truth to us. Isaiah visualizes God sitting on a high and towering throne. Round about God are figures the prophet calls seraphim, said to have hands, feet, faces, and wings. Some scholars believe they were dragon-like in appearance. The seraphim fly back and forth about the throne singing to one another of God's incomparable glory. At this point, Isaiah becomes suddenly and brutally aware of himself. Isaiah is aware of the contrast between his sinful nature and the awesome holiness of God. This contrast evokes lamenting cries: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips ..."

When looking at pictures of great cathedrals, like the Washington National Cathedral, one cannot help notice the ugly, grotesque figures, part human, part animal, which are often clustered about the steeple and towers. They are called "gargoyles." Gargoyles serve as water spouts. They are locating at the ends of rain gutters where water shoots out of the gaping mouth of the grotesque gargoyle. The word is Old French, meaning throat … a word from which we also get "gargle."

Toward the end of his life, Malcolm Muggeridge, the British journalist who converted to Christianity late in life, gave an interview on the BBC during which he told of his long fascination with the relationship between "the steeple and the gargoyle," and the juxtaposition of these two aesthetically opposite symbols. Steeples symbolize God, at least the human quest for the divine … gargoyles reflect baseness, the ugliness of humankind and the puny efforts of striving for the holy. Our attempts to climb the steeple, Muggeridge observed, are "blocked by the sin contending in our lives. The gargoyle lurks between the steeple and our ascent, seducing us downward rather than upward."

The "seraphs" in Isaiah's vision served as gargoyles in his attempt to reach the holy. The message from Isaiah is that you and I must not deny but be honest about our condition … must acknowledge our sinfulness (the gargoyles within and about us), in order to reach toward God ... to reach the Holy! At the same time, we must remember that at the tip of the steeple is a cross … a Cross by which God has reached down to pull us up past our personal "gargoyles" into the heavenly realm.

There is a story about Aristotle Onassis, the shipping magnate and second husband of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis that reflects in the literal sense the word "gargoyle" and how we sometimes are forced to see how low we can become. Onassis installed a luxurious private bathroom adjoining his office. The lavatory door really was a one-way mirror, allowing Onassis to observe unsuspecting visitors. During a business meeting one afternoon, Onassis excused himself and entered the bathroom. While seated, he was horrified to see his reflection staring back at him in the mirrored door. A workman making repairs earlier in the day had replaced the mirror the wrong way … reflecting badly not only upon the workmanship, but also upon Onassis' ethical standards.

It was the glory of God's brightness in which Isaiah saw himself … reflected back upon himself, to the point where Isaiah saw his true sinful self. This inspired him to change that image. Holiness does that … holiness exposes the unholy. "Woe is me!" Isaiah says, "I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among people of unclean lips." Only through that confession could Isaiah be cleansed … his throat cleared like the throat of a gargoyle. With the illusions of Isaiah's life stripped away, and faced only with reality, Isaiah's confession and response led to his "resurrection" to new life by God's grace.

Only when the illusions of our own life are stripped away, and we see ourselves … truly see ourselves as we are … fallen creatures in need of redemption and salvation … only when faced with such a reality are we able to know the full impact of God's grace upon our life. When the light of God shines upon us, and we truly see the real person that we are, do we then understand our need for God! When God faces us through the stark reality of our life, we are then … and only then … able to respond to God's presence in our life as Isaiah did: "Woe is me! Woe is me!" When we are able to truly confess what a "screw up" we are, do we come out the other end saved and free.

Loren Eiseley, the naturalist, wrote of an experience he once had as a child. After removing boards from an old well, he peered down along a shaft of sunlight into the well's dark and dank depths. Some 20 feet down there was a rusty pipe projecting

across the well space, and suddenly he saw scurrying along the pipe into the darkness a spidery thing of hair and many legs. Shivering and horrified, he quickly set the rotting boards covering the well back into place. Eiseley wrote: *Something that did not love the sun was down there … something that could walk through total darkness upon slender footholds over evil waters … something that had come down there by preference from above.*

I think that is the way it is with life. The world holds both: creatures of light and creatures of darkness … creatures of the heights and those of the depths … creatures of air and green, and creatures of dank darkness. And if we have descended into some abyss of blackness, we have no one to blame but ourselves … for it is we who have worked our way down. God created life; God created life good. We turned it into evil. As Jesus tells us, we love the darkness rather than the light. Though it's been said we are what we eat … I believe the greater truth is … we are what we love.

If our primary love is God, then we love the good and we will serve God faithfully. But if our primary love is self, then we love a lesser good, and chances are we are living to serve ourselves. To address this human problem, God sent His son into the world that the world may have a great light, in order for it to see its way out of the darkness. For us, God comes as Jesus … that we may no longer walk in darkness, but have a great light … and see our way clear to God.

This truth is revealed to us in today's gospel lesson. The miraculous catch of fish in Luke is an epiphany. However, there is a danger in being caught up in the miracle of catching lots of fish, and missing the message of the story. There is no need to think that Jesus created a shoal of fish for the occasion. Most likely Jesus' keen eye saw just such a shoal of fish, while Peter and the others, though laboring all night, were looking in the wrong place. One message is … we need eyes that really see. Many people saw steam raise the lid of a kettle … only James Watt went on to think of a steam engine. Many people saw an apple fall from a tree … only Isaac Newton went on to think out the law of gravity. The earth is full of miracles for the eye that really sees.

To Peter, Jesus is light that helps him see the truth. Peter believes his catching of a large amount of fish as a miracle. He thinks that Jesus has drawn fish from all over the lake … so he is astonished, amazed … completely overwhelmed. Then, his amazement turns to fear … for who knows what might come next? Peter's fear is a reaction to the holiness that is revealed through the miracle … more so than to the power it displays. Like Isaiah, moved by the contrast between the event and the holiness, Peter suddenly becomes aware of his sinfulness as never before.

This weakens his knees and he falls before Jesus crying out: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man." Peter's call as a disciple comes after this religious experience of repentance and forgiveness of sins. You see there is a danger in fishing with Jesus. Something beyond "belief" happens to the point that your illusions of this world are stripped away, reality seeps in, and then you must deal with … you must deal with your life as it truly is.

This is what it means to be Jesus' disciple! Before you or I can go out and "catch people" for God, we first must be caught ourselves. We must have that "experience" where God holds up the mirror and says: *Take a look … a good look, and ask yourself 'who am I and what is the meaning and the purpose of my life?* Before fishing for God, we must first be that fish that is caught and brought into God's net. We must face and accept our true self … a self that is in want and need of God's healing forgiveness and gracious love. Hopefully we discover … like Isaiah and Peter … that we are not worthy to serve and that it is God who makes us worthy when He calls us to serve. If we respond to such a call to minister, in the utter absurdity that Jesus would dare call us to serve, then we must also acknowledge the great privilege of becoming an agent or channel of God's miracles. Despite what many evangelists say, we do not "catch" others for Jesus. On the contrary, it is the living Christ who catches and uses us … even unworthy us.

I, better than you, know this to be a fact. Not a day goes by that I don't thank God for using me to serve Him, because I know that God overlooks my many shortcomings and leads me out into deep waters to fish with Him. Deep water is symbolic of the risk one takes with their faith … a faith that leads one to stand before God with fear and trembling and say, "Here I am ... warts and all! Use me, even me!"

And so I encourage each of you to push out into the deep. Life in the shallows is safe. However, God wants us out in the deep … casting your life in hope of miracles … living your life by His grace and grace alone! Apply your faith by living your faith … live your faith by serving God … serve God by loving God … love God by loving all those whom God brings to you to love! Indeed! We are what we love! Amen.