

Pr. Franklin Wilson
Luther Memorial Church
Isaiah 6.1-13; Psalm 138
1 Corinthians 15.1-11; St. Luke 5.1-11

The Lord said, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And Isaiah said, “Here am I; send me!” And [the Lord] said, “Go and say to this people: ‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.’”

Simon Peter said to Jesus, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.”

Fifth Sunday After Epiphany
Sun. Feb. 7, 2010

In September of the year our third child was born, my brother-in law got married. It was Labor Day weekend in Southern California; I was 33, and my father-in-law 58. We went swimming in the Pacific Ocean: the entire wedding party of pasty-faced Northwesterners looking like skim milk in January. We stepped into the ocean, warm as bath water—a bunch of oysters among a sea of Southern California women in their bikini toned sveltness, and men with biceps bulging and abs rippling like the waves. That didn’t stop us sporting and frolicking in the waves: first up to our wastes, then up to our necks, and then treading water in the seductive surf. Too late did I feel the undertow. Out of energy and nearly out of breath, I lay on my back and breathed in blue sky as the current carried me south. Staggering up the beach, I heard distant shouting. Gazing north, I saw a life guard spring from his tower, dash into the surf and slice like a speedboat through the crashing waves. Only later, when he dragged my father-in-law up the beach, did I learn what had happened. He had spotted Donald floundering a quarter mile out, had come to his rescue saying, “I’m going to take you in.” But Donald (an old Navy salt) had protested, saying he would make it in under his own power. To which the lifeguard said, “Have it your way, but I’m going to knock you out, and take you in unconscious.” Donald yielded. He had no choice.

In the year King Uzziah died, Isaiah tells us that, “I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe filled the temple.” So saying, Isaiah reports an experience few, if any, of us will have had. Certainly, I haven’t seen Isaiah’s vision. But I *have* seen movies—more than one—that depict God in images both fantastic and mundane. I suppose most of us have. We have seen visions manufactured by Hollywood, or homemade on You Tube—visions of God cast as a vast galaxy of hazy stars, a thunder storm, or a human being like Morgan Freeman, George Burns, or Whoopie Goldberg, persons of diverse gravity, age, and silliness—sufficient to market, entertain, and compel an audience of willing (if dubious) sophistication and naiveté.

How do we envision God? How do we view Isaiah’s vision of the Lord high, lofty, and sitting on a throne? In the midst of a university community of inquiry, empirical measurement, quantitative analysis, research, and learning, how do we speak of

Isaiah's God? How do we speak of the God who creates, sustains, and redeems the whole universe by means of a crucified man?

Isaiah's God defies conventional religious understanding—understandings despised by those who keep a watch on religion. But, so far as I can see, Isaiah's God opposes conventional religion. True, this God appears in the temple. But, after that, all conventional bets are off. Isaiah's God defies religious explanation, comprehension, understanding, and learning: "Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand. Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed." It's no surprise that centers of learning generally despise Isaiah's God. What thoughtful person, desiring to make it under their own power, wouldn't?

It's not merely that popular religious personalities of the televised variety continue to say the stupidest sort of things (like God is punishing Haiti because of a 300 year old pact with the devil), but that Isaiah's God defies every sort of explanation, understanding, and comfort: "Even if a tenth part of it remain in it, it will be burned again." It's not merely that Pat Robertson and his ilk say stupid things—though they do—it's that Isaiah's God says *even worse things*—and yet, we continue to believe.

It's as though we've been trapped—caught in a web of incomprehension by a lifeguard who defies our every effort to escape. Try as we might, we cannot rid ourselves of the God *whose purpose is misunderstanding*, whose presence burns like hot coals. Philosophers declare God dead; cosmonauts heckle God's absence, psychiatrists suspect psychic invention, and geneticists suppose genomic predisposition—faith as a genetic disorder on a par with breast cancer, baldness, and depression. We have every reason to deny God—yet a simultaneous need to confess God, even as we wonder why we do, and—as in the case of most confirmands—sincerely think we shouldn't. Perhaps we shouldn't, but we do believe.

So here on the 5th Sunday after the Epiphany, one Sunday before the Transfiguration, and 10 days before Lent, faced with the grim reality of God as a terrifying emperor-godfather, God makes us an offer we can't refuse: "Go and say to this people—no matter what, you'll never understand or comprehend. Moreover, says God, even after I've blasted the world into a wasteland more desolate than a Cormac McCarthy road, a holy seed remains...little more than a stump smoldering with fire.

That stump walks beside the Galilean lake, boards a fishing boat, and commands a hapless fisherman to contradict all his experience and common sense. He says, "Put out into the deep." And that command yields a catch surpassing all reason and understanding. That catch nearly sinks both boats, and so astonishes the fisherman that he himself gets caught, even as he falls into the same religious trap of every human being who ever contemplated the mystery of holiness: "Go away from me, for I am a sinful man."

Peter declares our common religious assumption: that we can tell the lifeguard what to do; that close proximity to holiness will annihilate us. Jesus, of course, contradicts religious assumption—which is why Pat Robertson would be wrong even if he were right: far from leaving or destroying, Jesus draws closer to sinful human beings that he himself might be destroyed. Rather than leave sinful human beings to fish for understandable answers, Jesus draws us in, catches us in his net, that we might share his unfathomable work: “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.”

Christ comes not that we might understand God, but that God might rescue us—even if he must violate us to do so. Christ nets us in the waters of baptism. Captures us in the most absurd fishing story ever. Consumes us in the mystery of bread and cup.

Christ has cast his net, and caught us. We are his. He will not leave us. The stump abides. The holy seed grows. Like fish in a net, like a drowning man, we struggle, doubt, and believe. Do not be afraid. Thanks be to God.