

Epiphany 5C, Isaiah 6:1-8, Luke 5:1-11 (*Elizabeth Felicetti, Old Donation Church, 2/7/2010*)

Good morning! I'm so grateful that God called us here this morning. You might think it was all your idea to show up today, but every one of us is responding to a call from God, just like Isaiah and Simon Peter in today's readings.

We heard that Isaiah went to the temple in the year that King Uzziah died. So, why is that part significant enough to mention? Well, the year that King Uzziah died would have been a particularly disorienting time, because the king had ruled for decades. So the world as Isaiah had known it was changing in a major way, and the transition must have everyone else anxious. In Isaiah's anxiety about the earthly king, he turns to the temple, seeking assurance from a divine king.

When Isaiah goes to the temple, he encounters God. We read that the hem of God's garment filled the temple. That's an image that always jumps out at me in this passage. The temple was the most awe-inspiring structure Isaiah knew; think of the largest, most impressive cathedral that you've ever been in, with high ceiling, the kind of place that makes your jaw drop. And think of that place *filled* by an insignificant part of what God happened to be wearing that day.

There's a lot about filling and fullness in this passage: the hem fills the temple; and the temple is filled with smoke; and angels sing about the earth being *full* of God's glory. All this fullness and magnificence and abundance makes Isaiah recognize how small and insignificant he is, and he says, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips."

It's a confession, isn't it? Not unlike the confession we make week after week here, when we confess together that we have sinned against God in thought and word and deed. And in Rite I, we stress our unworthiness even further in the prayer of humble access, praying that "we are not worthy to gather up the crumbs under thy table."

This confession Isaiah makes is also a lot like the confession Simon makes in the story about Simon Peter's call. Simon says, "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man." Simon does not encounter the holy in a temple, with incense and angels, like Isaiah did; but rather, Simon encounters God in his everyday workplace, while he's cleaning his net, surrounded by other sweaty, hardworking fishermen. Simon Peter had a bad day at work, not catching one thing. Then this carpenter Jesus from Nazareth shows up, and Simon rows him out a bit so that Jesus can preach to the crowds. Then after Jesus is finished preaching, he tells Peter to let his nets down one more time. Simon's skeptical, of course, but he does it; and then, he is shocked to have the catch of his life. We get images of fullness again, abundance, overabundance, as we did in the Isaiah reading: Peter and his friends catch so many fish that their nets fill and begin to burst; their boat is filled and so is another boat they flag down to help; both boats are so full they start to sink.

And Simon Peter, overwhelmed by this encounter with the holy, says, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.”

Maybe on Sunday morning, or at other times, we sense the presence of God, the abundance of our blessings, and we feel insignificant, so insignificant that our urge is to confess, maybe even to flee.

Or maybe some of us are put off a bit by the confession, the language about how sinful we are—because overall, we’re pretty good people, right? It’s not like we’re out there committing crimes, other than maybe a few minor traffic violations here and then. But we pay our taxes. And here we are in church on a Sunday morning, following *bad weather*, instead of sleeping in or watching television. That should count for something, right? We’re nice people in a nice place, and the talk about unworthiness is kind of a downer.

But church is the best place for us to confess, and church is a place where we come hoping to encounter the fullness of God. We’re still in the season of Epiphany, a season for finding God, like the wise men did at the end of their journey; a season for being dazzled by the fullness of the presence of God.

And it’s not only in church that we encounter God’s fullness. Like Simon Peter, I have experienced the fullness of God in ordinary places. One of the holiest places I’ve ever encountered was a small house in Suffolk, which had started being renovated, before the man of the house, who was a member of my bible study at the time, was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig’s disease. He spent many Sundays in ICU before being sent home on a ventilator, which he was distressed to learn he would have to endure for the rest of his life, as well as being fed through a tube. His wife and stepdaughter, also in the bible study, exhausted themselves caring for him around the clock.

I was a brand new Eucharistic Visitor in my little country church in Suffolk, and these people were dear friends of mine. In fact, the main reason I became a Eucharistic Visitor was to take the sacraments to them. The man, being on a ventilator, couldn’t swallow, or speak. But we realized we could dip a spoon in the wine and he could close his mouth around it. And I will never forget the fullness of God’s presence when I put that spoon in his mouth, and he closed his eyes, and tears spilled out as he tasted the blood of Christ in his mouth.

I truly encountered the fullness of God that day.

And like Peter, like Isaiah, I felt utterly unworthy. As I drove home, thinking about how I could see how much he had longed for the sacrament as he took that spoon in his mouth, I thought about the years in college and in my 20s that I had missed church completely, that I had not come to Christ’s table, that I had not tasted the wine, even though, like all of us, I was always

welcome at the table. My thoughts were similar to Simon Peter and Isaiah: woe is me. I am unworthy.

We come here to Old Donation because, like Simon Peter, like Isaiah, we're called. Maybe like Isaiah, we're disconcerted by a major change; maybe we come because we need comfort; maybe we aren't sure why we've come. Whatever the reason we think we came, we were called to this place.

And when we experience the fullness of God, how can we help but feel small? We confess every week that we have sinned, in thought and word and deed.

And we hear God's forgiveness declared to us. We are beloved, we are forgiven, we are strengthened in all goodness. We were cleansed in baptism, and we continue to be formed as disciples every time we come, sharing a meal at God's table. Church is a place where we are filled, with God's word, with the body and blood of Christ, with the Spirit; and after we experience the fullness of God, we don't linger at the table: we are sent back out.

After Isaiah was cleansed by the coal, God asked, "Who shall go for us; whom shall I send?" Isaiah had just had a mountaintop experience, in a place bursting with the holy, and surely he would have loved to remain; but filled with the Spirit, he said instead, "Here I am; send me!"

Peter ended up with the catch of his life, with two boats bursting with fish. But he didn't rush off to the market to sell them, to line his pockets, to procure a better lifestyle. Instead, Peter dropped to his knees and confessed; and Jesus told him, *don't be afraid*.

Do not be afraid. We hear that over and over in this season of Epiphany, don't we? We heard it last week in the call of the prophet Jeremiah: do not be afraid. Do not be afraid, Jesus said. Now you will fish for people. And Peter changed his life. He left behind the boats bursting with fish, and became a disciple, fishing for people.

We come to church because God called us here, and we responded. We keep coming to get filled up, to learn, to hear that we are forgiven for our imperfections.

But we don't linger at the table. In fact, we eat and run! We are now disciples, who get filled up and sent back out, to share the good news of God's love, in thought and word and deed, with everyone we encounter. Because they are being called, as well.