

## Scripture Reading for January 30, 2022

### Isaiah 6:1-8 (NIV)

<sup>6</sup> In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. <sup>2</sup> Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. <sup>3</sup> And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." <sup>4</sup> At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook, and the temple was filled with smoke. <sup>5</sup> "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." <sup>6</sup> Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. <sup>7</sup> With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." <sup>8</sup> Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

### Luke 5:1-11 (NIV)

<sup>5</sup> One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. <sup>2</sup> He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. <sup>3</sup> He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

<sup>4</sup> When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." <sup>5</sup> Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

<sup>6</sup> When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. <sup>7</sup> So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

<sup>8</sup> When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" <sup>9</sup> For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, <sup>10</sup> and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." <sup>11</sup> So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

## Sermon: Jesus Calls Us<sup>1</sup>

Desmond Tutu was a high school teacher for three years before he saw the light and went back to university to study theology. Gandhi was a lawyer before he became a political and ethical activist. The current archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, worked as a financial executive in the oil industry for eleven years before resigning in order to study theology. Even then he was at first rejected for ordination by Bishop John Hughes, who said: “There is no place for you in the Church of England”! People who dramatically switch careers usually have an interesting story to tell. When religion is thrown into the mix, that story can be profoundly inspiring because *God* is deemed to be part of the motivation for the change. Two pioneers of the early church, Peter and Paul, both had spectacular changes in their life’s journeys. And Luke writes about their remarkable transitions. Paul was a pious and influential pharisee who saw his role as persecuting an emerging Jewish sect - one that would later be called “Christianity” - so as to preserve the religious purity and integrity of Judaism. We have all heard about his road to Damascus experience, and I have spoken on it before.<sup>2</sup> Peter was a self-employed fisherman on the Lake Galilee, who was apparently wealthy enough to own his own boat.<sup>3</sup> As you will have guessed, today we will be considering Luke’s account of Peter’s career change.

But before we briefly explore the details, it’s worth knowing that such stories were important in their own right because they provided later *authority* for the individual so that others would respectfully pay attention to what they *said* and *did*.<sup>4</sup> As you know, Peter would become the first leader of the church in Jerusalem and this story of Jesus’ *specific* call on Peter’s life provides a significant basis for his important role.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Old Testament prophets were perceived by the people to be God’s messengers, in part because they could also relate a powerful story of God’s initial call on their lives.<sup>6</sup> Today’s reading from Isaiah describes his visionary experience of an exalted God, within the temple, surrounded by angels saying “Holy, Holy, Holy.”<sup>7</sup> If I can put it this way, it was like a spectacular rock concert, with lights, sounds, smoke, and the floor vibrating. Isaiah felt totally impure in the presence of such holiness and feared he would die. But no, an angel comes and purifies him and forgives his sin! At which point in the vision, Isaiah hears God’s own voice booming: “Whom shall I send? And what can Isaiah do but respond: “Here am I. Send me!”<sup>8</sup> There’s another thing about such call stories too.

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<sup>1</sup> Consider the lyrics of the old hymn: “Jesus Call Us O’er the Tumult.” ( <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idAoS7at3nQ> )

<sup>2</sup> Acts 9:1-31; <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/An-Unlikely-Witness-to-the-Resurrection.pdf> .

<sup>3</sup> Or perhaps co-owned it with his brother, Andrew (cf. Luke 5:3; Matt 4:18; Mark 1:16). Luke 5:10 also states that James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were Peter’s business partners.

<sup>4</sup> Incidentally, the baptism of Jesus can be considered as *his* call narrative: Mark 1:10–11; Matt 3:16–17; Luke 3:21–22.

<sup>5</sup> This is particularly important as Peter later denied knowing Jesus and John 21 describes Jesus’ reinstating Peter into his leadership role. (In fact, the close parallels between John 21 and Luke’s account causes some scholars to wonder if Luke is adapting the oral tradition John used for his own purposes - to promote Peter in light of Mark’s negative portrayal of him.)

<sup>6</sup> It also mattered what the prophet later said: was it wise, truthful (not false), and did aspects of his oracle come to pass?

<sup>7</sup> Isa 6:1-3.

<sup>8</sup> Isa 6:4-8. The purifying of Isaiah’s lips signifies his later speech was to be regarded as holy. (Jer 1:4-10 and Ezek 2-3 describes their distinctive calls.)

Leadership, in whatever walk of life, is challenging and lonely – and made more so with the additional challenges of managing COVID. There will inevitably be moments of self-doubt and at such times of self-reflection, a person will draw on their own call story as to why they are in this vocation in the first place! So, with that in mind, let's consider Peter's story.

In the previous chapter,<sup>9</sup> Luke established Jesus as an independent preacher, exorcist, and healer traveling alone to Nazareth, Capernaum, and the regions of Galilee, while proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God.<sup>10</sup> The impression Luke gives is that Peter and his fellow fishermen had some idea of Jesus' reputation before this day.<sup>11</sup> One day, as a popular Jesus was preaching by the lake, the crowds were so pressing in on him that he was forced to use Simon's 30-foot boat as a off-shore pulpit. We are told that when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."<sup>12</sup>

Now as long as Simon's boat is being used for a pulpit, the owner has no objection to Jesus saying in it what he likes. But when it reverts to being a fishing boat, it's Simon's domain once more, and Jesus no longer has a say in how it's to be used. Fishing is Simon's profession! Why on earth should a carpenter-turned-preacher presume tell Simon *how* to catch fish. Simon and his colleagues had been fishing all night and caught nothing.<sup>13</sup> In the same way, people today will listen to story about Jesus, will perhaps consider what he has to say, and may even ask him in prayer to make them better when they are sick, but for Jesus to interfere with their job, their home, their money, their leisure - well, that's another thing altogether! "Surely," they exclaim, "those day-to-day matters have *nothing* to do with "religion"!

Nevertheless, Simon is gracious; they go into deep waters to fish and a miracle happens! Like the extravagant abundance of wine at the wedding of Cana,<sup>14</sup> this *lavish* miracle requires a second boat and even then, both are about to sink by being overfilled with fish. The fishermen had never experienced anything like it, and Peter realised that he was in the presence of God. He fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, *Lord*, for I am a sinful man!"<sup>15</sup> His reaction was like that of Isaiah when, in his vision, he witnessed the holy presence of God. Jesus does not rebuke Peter for calling him *Lord* or for kneeling in front of him. He simply reassures him by saying "Do not be afraid," the same words Luke

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<sup>9</sup> Luke 4:31-44. This is in contrast to Mark 1:16-20 where Jesus appoints Peter, Andrew, James, and John as disciples *immediately* after his temptations in the wilderness. (And only *later* heals Peter's mother-in-law Mark 1:29-31.) See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Come-Follow-Me-For-the-Time-is-Now.pdf> .

<sup>10</sup> See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Whats-the-Good-News.pdf> .

<sup>11</sup> Taking Luke at face value, Peter's mother-in-law was healed *prior* to this call story (Luke 4:38-39, see also [8].)

<sup>12</sup> Luke 5:4.

<sup>13</sup> Luke 5:5.

<sup>14</sup> <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Gods-Gracious-Extravagance.pdf> .

<sup>15</sup> Luke 5:8. (At a *minimum*, Peter knows he's in the presence of *a man of God*.) The word "Lord" in this context is, I believe, significant. See Reddish, *The Jesus I Didn't Know I Didn't Know*, Wipf & Stock, 2021, p33-34.

used earlier when angels were trying to calm shocked Zechariah, Mary, and the shepherds.<sup>16</sup> Jesus then says to Peter and his business partners, James and John: “From now on you will be catching people” and the Greek wording implies they will be rescuing them and keeping them *alive* for God’s kingdom! Notice that it wasn’t the sermon that moved Peter and his friends, it was the influence Jesus had on their daily work. And that wouldn’t have been experienced *if* Peter had refused to follow what Jesus asked them to do. Remember too why Jesus called Peter and his friends to follow him; *he didn’t want to leave others out*. Jesus wanted Peter to bring the kingdom to others and others to the kingdom.

If we want to experience the reality of God’s kingdom, then we must allow it to invade our *everyday* lives and not simply regard it as a private Sunday activity. And when we encounter God’s activity in our places of work, in our families and homes then the shock of that will make us aware what it means when we say Jesus is Lord of *all creation* or *all of life*. It was a fishing miracle that convicted Peter’s heart; what will it take for you and me? Some of you will have such stories of God’s presence being profoundly experienced. Then we need to remind ourselves of them and look forward to more, for our gracious God is generous. Others may be hovering at the edges of faith and still wonder. My prayer is that Jesus will reveal himself to you *in your daily lives*, since that is more likely to convince you of the reality of God’s kingdom than anything I might say. Consider: If Jesus asked you to do something that seemed foolish, as did that instruction of Jesus to Peter, what would you do? Remember, in Peter’s case the directive appeared laughable, *not* irresponsible. Peter’s life was never in danger nor was his livelihood when he went to cast his nets again in the deep water. He was an experienced fisherman and was in his element, yet that’s where God surprised him. If your conscience or the Holy Spirit prompts you, acting on that might result in an epiphany.

Notice too that the fishermen had done nothing to warrant or merit Jesus’ call on their lives. They were *not* called because of their qualifications, character, or potential. Jesus did not call them because he foresaw the future and realized who they would become and thought I’d better get these guys on board with the program while I can! No, God’s call on a person’s life is as unpredictable as it is unmerited. It begins an adventure of grace – who knows the outcome! Tutu, Gandhi, and Welby didn’t know what they were getting into when they switched careers. You simply start and see what happens.

Many reading this kind of call story will think it *only* applies to people like Peter, namely, future leaders of the church. I think that’s a short-sighted view. Jesus is spreading the good news of the kingdom of God and that *invades everyday life for everyone*, not just a select few. And that means we *all* have a role wherever we are, and yours may well be far more influential than mine! One of the ironic features of Christ’s ministry was its *subversive* nature. He was *not* trying to change society – like the Romans - by top-down tyranny but by transforming people’s lives so that reform would arise in a bottom-up way. That may be the slow way to create change, but I suggest it will ultimately be the *enduring* way. It’s said that evil abounds when good people do nothing. Martin Luther King Jr. expressed it this way: “In the

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<sup>16</sup> Luke 5:10; 1:13, 30; 2:10. Again this points to Jesus being at least a prophet, possibly more...

end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.” I believe there’s power for change when enough people speak up and act wisely for the good of all. If we go by the name of “Christian,” our calling is to authentically live out the reality of God’s reign *in all walks of life*, seven-days-a-week. We are strengthened in that task by the Holy Spirit, given generously to *all* Christ’s followers at Pentecost and affirmed through baptism, together with our practice of spiritual disciplines – including prayer.

Having, I hope, made that important point, leaders do have a key role too.<sup>17</sup> In whatever spheres of influence you move, God may be nudging you into a leadership role. Others may be encouraging you too, not cynically so they are let off the hook, but because they genuinely perceive you may have what it takes if given the opportunity. You will have to discern that carefully; I suggest you talk it over with those you trust and who know you well. Sometimes God’s nudging can seem more of a push! At other times, we make a simple, straight-forward step, as Peter did when they went to fish, and the result is an affirmation and an opportunity we simply can’t ignore. How might that look for us today? As an application for promotion or different level of responsibility or applying for a new job or running for some sort of elected office. And yes, God might be calling you into church leadership in some capacity too. In whatever situation it may be, God knows your present skillset, talents, interests, and aptitude and seeks them in the service of his kingdom. Some may understandably be anxious at this prospect, wondering about the financial implications in an uncertain world. Well, later on in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus says: “Seek God’s kingdom, and those things will be yours as well.”<sup>18</sup> Some may respond, like Peter, with “Who am I to undertake such a task?” Hear again the response of Jesus: “Do not be afraid.” Remember, God has a habit of choosing unlikely people make a difference; consider the hesitancy of Moses and Gideon, for example. Paul also reminds the Corinthian church: “Think about the circumstances of your call, brothers and sisters. Not many were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were born to a privileged position. But God chose what the world thinks foolish to shame the wise, and God chose what the world thinks weak to shame the strong.”<sup>19</sup> That being the case: “Do not be afraid.”

What’s your reaction to today’s story? It’s certainly easy to dismiss it as religion encroaching into my private life. Yet, if we do that, we will miss out on God’s surprising blessings, remembering – as this story illustrates - he is the Lord of *all life* and not just what we separate out as “spiritual” things. For others, the timing of this topic may seem curiously coincidental to with some decision making that’s already going on in your life right now; if so, be encouraged and think on. Regardless, Jesus invites us all – day by day. May our response be, as the old hymn puts it: “help us hear your call; give our hearts to your obedience, serve and love you best of all!” Amen. Let us pray.

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<sup>17</sup> Remember too that the social and political activism of Tutu, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. *arose from their faith conviction*, as they tried to bring down barriers that separate people.

<sup>18</sup> Luke 12:31. Without doubt, our risky faith journey is one of *trust* in God’s *character*. See also Luke 18:28-30; 14:33.

<sup>19</sup> 1 Cor 1:26-27.