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What was Peter expecting when he let Jesus commandeer his boat as a pulpit? He had already met and heard Jesus and had even invited him to dine in his home where he saw Jesus heal his mother-in-law. Then the preaching carpenter said he wanted to preach from his boat. Why not? The guys had already lost the night in fruitless toil.

When the inlander from Nazareth suggested that Peter head out for the deep, it must have seemed unrealistic and at least a little odd. It is one thing to build and furnish a house or even restore people to health, but professionals have their specialties and there was nothing to recommend Jesus as an expert in the realm of fishing. Nevertheless, Peter was nothing if not daring. Why not let the preacher learn about his limits?

This was only the first time that Jesus turned the tables on Peter. Little did Peter know that when he said, "At your command, I will lower the nets," he was paraphrasing Jesus' mother who told the angel Gabriel, "May it be done to me according to your word." Mary could have warned Peter that when you give God an inch, you have no idea where you will end up.

We know the story. Peter and his companions were overwhelmed at the catch. It was more than they could handle — physically or psychologically. Seeing what he could not understand, Peter reacted with fear. He fell before Jesus as he would before a ruler and respectfully asked him to let him be.

Most of us can sympathize with Peter. We have learned to live with moderate expectations. We know how to handle an occasional long, hard, unsuccessful work project. And besides, good preaching is a great boon and we would all be willing to lend someone our boat in order to hear it. But when the preacher who promises good news makes incredible things actually happen, when going against good sense and proven practice turns out to be more successful than anything we have ever tried, the possibilities seem absolutely terrifying. It is unrealistic, but our small faith and tiny hopes are unexpectedly challenged.

Peter quickly assessed the situation. He saw that Jesus was offering more than he could handle. He knew intuitively that if he stayed with Jesus, nothing would ever be the same. So in typical fashion, he tried to wiggle out of the situation. He didn't run, but he asked Jesus to go away. (Luke doesn't pay attention to the fact that they were still out on the water when this interchange took place.)

Peter's first attempt to tell Jesus what to do came in the form of his explanation that he was too sinful for Jesus to work with. The fishing story was but a symbol of Peter's underestimation of Jesus' purpose and power, not to mention his love. Jesus was not about to leave, nor was he going to let the fishermen get away too easily. Making a pun that probably lightened the tension, Jesus ignored Peter's protest about being too sinful and told him and his friends that instead of catching fish, they would now be taking people captive. It was an offer they would not refuse.

That day on the boat was decisive. Peter and company had heard and seen Jesus. They had broken bread with him and seen his healing power. But the experience on the boat threw it all into a new perspective.

Of course, the extraordinary catch was mind-boggling. But more than that was Jesus' refusal to agree that they were unworthy. He was more than they had ever imagined, and yet he wanted them to join him. He didn't deny their weakness but assured them that they had no idea what they could accomplish if they let him lead the way. It was his love that made the offer irresistible.

Luke tells us this story about Peter and his buddies so that we can find ourselves in it. As we read the Gospel, we will note that the extraordinary catch was just that. Their days were not filled with unmitigated success. But that one experience had caught them up in Jesus' net. They saw enough to know that they couldn't imagine what was possible — and that was the good news Jesus preached.

Perhaps the question of the day is whether we are willing to allow Jesus to commandeer our boats. Peter would warn us that allowing Jesus onto our turf will not turn out as we might expect. We will become painfully aware of our inadequacy and sinfulness. And in the midst of that, we may be captivated and discover how our small faith and tiny hopes can grow into extraordinary and miraculously realistic expectations.

### **ISAIAH 6:1-2a, 3-8**

Isaiah tells us a fantastic call story. But even with its exotic elements, he begins by rooting the event firmly in historical time. It was the year when King Uzziah died. Chronologically, that was probably around 736 B.C.E. But the real importance of the time was that Uzziah's death brought the end of a time of political stability and the coming of God's judgment upon Israel.

While the history Isaiah recalls was momentous, the vision he had was absolutely overwhelming. Isaiah had an experience of the God whose presence was so immense that just the hem of God's garment filled the entire temple. God was attended by fiery angels who taught the church one of our most oft-sung hymns: Holy, Holy, Holy. This is the hymn that joyously proclaims that humans and angels can glimpse the glory of the God who created the universe. The proclamation that God is "holy" asserts that God is beyond everything humanly knowable. Yet this God fills creation with signs of what divinity implies.

This vision led Isaiah to crumple. He had the reaction Scripture calls "fear of the Lord." God's immense greatness was overpowering. In the face of thunder and fire, angels and earthquake, Isaiah could only cry out, "Woe is me!"

Nothing could be more honest than Isaiah's reaction. Like parents who glimpse pure innocence and eternity when they behold their infant, like people who are moved to tears by seeing the sunset over the ocean, like a prisoner who gazes on the Milky Way for the first time in years, Isaiah's encounter with grandeur brought him to his knees in awareness of his insignificance and sinfulness.

Isaiah's recognition of his own unworthiness opened the way to his transformation. When he acknowledged that God's ways were too great for him, the angel purified his lips, and he was prepared to speak God's word. This is the irony of vocation: The realization that we are unworthy, incapable and even unwilling, can open us to the grace we need to accomplish what we are unable to do on our own.

After the angel cleansed his lips, Isaiah heard the divine voice asking, "Whom shall I send?" With this, Isaiah becomes the most willing of the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures. All the others were too aware of the difficulties and their weakness. But Isaiah, perhaps spurred by the seraph's blazing purification, shouted, "Here I am, send me!"

Spending some time with Isaiah and his call can allow us to get in touch with our own experiences of God's transcendence. Our spirits, so often mired in the events and problems of chronological time, need encounters with God's transcendence and beauty, God's overwhelming goodness, God's love and greatness. The experiences that lead us to cry "Holy!" are essential to our vocation. Remembering them, we can be humble servants who believe that, in spite of our sin and hardness of heart, all things are possible with God. Every encounter with a sign of God's greatness is an invitation to join Isaiah in saying, "Here I am, send me!"

### **PSALM 138:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 7-8**

"In the sight of your angels, I will sing your praises, Lord." What better refrain could we sing in response to an encounter with the grandeur of God!

If we look at the original Hebrew, this song takes on a different hue. What the Lectionary translates as "angels" is actually *elohim*, a Hebrew word that Irene Nowell in her book *Sing a New Song: The Psalms in the Sunday Lectionary* says is better translated as "God" or "gods/idols." The theology of the psalm goes back centuries and reflects Israel's slow growth in monotheistic faith. For us, thinking of singing God's praise in the presence of idols could add a unique contemporary twist to praying this psalm.

Although we in the United States don't often speak of it, our Latin American brothers and sisters recognize idolatry as a genuine threat to faith and human well-being. The document produced by the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops in 2007, "*Aparecida*," denounced contemporary "idols of power,

wealth, and momentary pleasure” as having established “a culture against the human being and the good of Latin American peoples” (#13, 387). In that document, the bishops denounce the rising violence that results from “worship of money, the advance of an individualistic and utilitarian ideology, [and] disrespect for the dignity of each person”(#78).

If we would understand this psalm as a protest against contemporary idolatry, singing it would become a great act of evangelization. We would be asserting our faith that God’s ways are more powerful and valuable than anything offered by “economic well-being and hedonistic satisfaction” (#50).

In truth, we cannot pray apart from our historical context as if we lived only in the sight of the angels. Isaiah said his vision came in the year of King Uzziah’s death, reminding us that no one can relate to God outside of the milieu in which we live and move. If we genuinely want to sing God’s praise, we must do so in and from the concrete reality of our social and ecclesial life. Therefore, announcing God’s goodness to humanity necessarily includes denouncing anything and everything that contradicts human dignity and respect for God’s creation.

## **1 CORINTHIANS 15: 1-11**

In this selection from his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul reminds us of the “Gospel” he preached. He offers this selection as if he were giving us the executive summary of everything he tries to say in his preaching and the writings that came from it. Paul is the first Christian author to use the word “Gospel,” and he uses it more than any other Christian Scripture writer.

A close examination of today’s reading reveals two essential elements of what Paul calls the Gospel: Christ’s death and resurrection for us and the effects of that as seen in Paul’s life.

At first, Paul shares the basic knowledge he received about Christ: He died for our sins, was buried, raised up, and seen by a variety of witnesses. Those four statements are so intricately related that no one of them means much without the rest. Sin truly brought an end to the earthly life of the man Jesus. His cadaver was buried. But that was simply the necessary prologue to demonstrate that sin’s mortal power cannot overpower the God who raised Jesus up as the Christ. Paul’s creedal truths expressed intellectual knowledge but also truths of the heart and gut. Christ’s

death proved that death, the ultimate expression of evil's power, cannot overcome the life and love of God. People who believed that would have nothing at all to fear. Ever.

That creed led Paul into his life's mission: the proclamation of the Gospel. Paul explains this idea by saying that the grace of God "has not been ineffective" in his life. In fact, the grace he received impels him to mission just as he expects it to impel his community.

Paul's Gospel is knowledge of the sort that one gains by falling in love. Lovers can say something about the theory of love, but words are only feeble attempts to explain their actions and motivations. Analogously, Paul's Gospel is more like an invasion by the Spirit than a theological proposition.

Paul began this selection saying, "I am reminding you." He wasn't reviewing the catechism but inviting his people to remember how they fell in love with Christ, how the Gospel turned their lives upside down and brought them joy that was deeper than any circumstances they might experience. We who hear the reading are invited to the same act of remembering so that we too can be reenergized by the Gospel that saves us from everything we could ever fear, everything that would prevent us from acting in love.

### **LUKE 5:1-11**

In the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, Jesus calls Simon and his companions as he is walking by the shore and sees them fixing their nets. They leave everything behind and follow him immediately. Luke sets the story up differently. In his scenario, Jesus has already visited Simon's house and healed his mother-in-law. Then, Jesus was teaching near the shore and asked Simon to let him address the crowd from the boat.

Luke has no interest in telling us what Jesus taught that day. He mentions neither the preaching nor the audience again. The dialog and direct quotations in the story focus on Jesus and Peter whose boat had served for nothing that day until it became Jesus' preaching perch.

When Jesus had finished teaching, he used a highly symbolic phrase, asking Simon to put out into the "deep" for a catch. Simon answered that they had tried all they could, but like Mary at the Annunciation who couldn't imagine how the angel's

promise would come to pass, Simon Peter obeyed a command that made no sense on a professional level.

When he saw the results of his obedience, Peter was overwhelmed. He realized that Jesus was more than a builder and healer — he was extraordinary in a way that could only have to do with God. Peter realized that the difference between Jesus and the fishermen was too great for him to breach. He was a sinner, so speaking for the group, he asked Jesus to leave them.

Without denying their weakness, Jesus let them know they were capable of more than they had ever dreamed of. Peter, the spokesperson, had heard Jesus and seen his healing power. He had invited him into his home and work space. Ultimately, he had obeyed Jesus' command, even though it made no sense, and that was the step that changed Peter's sense of everything.

Today's readings combine to invite us to recall the reasons for our faith. Like Isaiah, we need to take time to remember and cherish our moments of marveling at God's grandeur and love. Like Peter, we need to renew our awe at the power and love that has led us to fall on our knees and recognize our littleness and our desire to become all God intends us to be. We also need to be prepared for the fact that opening ourselves to a renewed encounter with Christ will change us. He will again come into our homes and invade our workspace. And all of that is simply a prelude to transforming our lives and enticing us into his mission.

## **Planning: Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

By Lawrence Mick

The first reading today offers a good opportunity for liturgical catechesis. We sing the *Holy, Holy, Holy*, week after week, often with no awareness of its source.

Parishioners might be surprised to learn that it was also sung in the synagogue morning prayer (just the first half) from at least the second century. The second half comes from Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem and was added to the Isaiah text at least by the sixth century.

A deeper form of liturgical formation might also be suggested by that first reading. Isaiah was clearly awe-struck by the vision he received. His reaction was to realize and admit his sinfulness: "For I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips."

The second reading reminds us of a similar response from Paul after his encounter with the risen Christ on the way to Damascus: "For I am the least of the apostles, not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." The Gospel continues the pattern with Peter's reaction to the miraculous catch of fish: "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man."

We could take these readings as a call to remind parishioners that we are all sinners, unworthy to be in the presence of God. But it may be more important to remind people that when we gather for the liturgy, we *are* in the presence of God. God is everywhere, of course, but when we gather we should have a heightened awareness of God's presence so that we might be more easily transformed by encountering the living God.

This can be tricky because some people think that the only way to focus on God is to ignore everyone around them. That is not appropriate during our common worship. We need to help people recognize that God often reveals the divine precisely through those people around us. That may be through the lector's voice, or the communion minister's hands, or the preacher's reflections. But it may also be in the smile of a child, a kind greeting at the sign of peace, the wise gentleness of an elderly parishioner, or even the disrupting presence of a street person who wanders in during the liturgy. God can reach out to us in a thousand ways. The challenge is for us to be alert and open to recognize and welcome God's presence and love. It is our sense of awe at God's closeness that invites us to acknowledge our sins and failures, knowing that our God is merciful and forgiving.

Can the preaching and prayers today invite people to look more deeply into the experience of the liturgy, to see Christ not only in the bread and wine but in all the modes of his presence? We must be attentive to God's presence, not by looking away from the community and its ritual, but by looking more deeply to see beneath the surface.



# Prayers: Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Joan DeMerchant

## Introduction

Today's readings attest to the fact that God's call list is littered with seemingly unworthy people. And God's call has come — and still comes — in countless ways, including in lofty visions, among crowds of people, and in the midst of unabashedly simple work. The presence of the so-called "Hound of Heaven" is everywhere. Thinking "I am not worthy" didn't work for others, and it won't work for us. We may as well put our energy into watching and listening.

## Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you chose others to work with you in your ministry: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you called Simon, James and John from among fishermen: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to be your partners in this time and place: Lord, have mercy.

## Prayer of the Faithful

**Presider** Let us pray for our needs, the needs of the church, and the needs of the whole world.

**Minister** For the whole church: May we always be aware of God's presence to us as individuals and whenever we are gathered together as community, we pray:

- For gratitude that God is present to us in all aspects of our worship: the readings and homily, the sign of peace and the bread and wine, our prayers and song, and every person who enters these doors, we pray:
- For the ability to recognize God's presence in those who are of different races or religions, cultural or ethnic origins, political or social groups, we pray:
- For those who use fear or a sense of unworthiness to avoid responding to God's call, or who judge others as unworthy because they are different, we pray:
- For those willing to answer God's call to walk into unknown, difficult or dangerous situations on behalf of the Gospel, or on behalf of human needs, we pray:

- For those whose work seems demeaning: those who clean our homes and our streets, collect our waste, repair our goods and our infrastructure, or companion the sick and lonely, we pray:
- For a deep sense of solidarity with all those in this community who are suffering in any way, we pray:

**Presider** Summoning God, we have been told that you set your sights on us, unworthy as we are. Open our eyes and ears, our minds and hearts that we may hear and respond to your call. Heal our false humility, our fear and our reluctance that, like Isaiah, we may say, “Send me!” We ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

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