

Isaiah 6:1-8 and Luke 5:1-11

We heard two very different stories of calling today.

Isaiah experiences a grand vision of God at a time of national crisis.

It was the year King Uzziah died. Uzziah, also called Azariah, was one of the longest reigning kings of Judah, ruling approximately from 792 to 740 BC, 52 years. And Isaiah worked in his court as a palace scribe. His reign was a time of prosperity for Judah. The nation expanded, taking back territory from the Philistines and others. He kept a well-provisioned standing army, so there was security. He reopened the port city of Elath on the Gulf of Aqaba, allowing Judah to resume trade with Ethiopia and Sheba, bringing in expensive foreign goods.

But for all his accomplishments, Uzziah was undone by pride. He presumed to take the role of a priest, offering sacrifices to God. This was common in other ancient Near Eastern cultures, but forbidden among God's people. He was cursed with what we often call leprosy, but we are not really sure what the biblical disease of leprosy. Whatever it actually was, it meant he was not allowed to keep up the public parts of his role, so his son became the de facto king in his place.

And then things got worse. He died at a critical time. Assyria, the neighborhood bully on the block in the 8th century, was on the move. Their king, Tiglath-Pileser III began a conquest of the lands along the Mediterranean, starting in 740 BC. A powerful and long-reigning king was gone, and their enemies were on the move.

In that context, Isaiah experiences a vision of God in the Temple. He is seated on his throne. The Holy of Holies was intended to represent God's throne on earth, with the Ark of the Covenant as his footstool. God's robe fills the Temple. And he is surrounded by seraphim. The word seraphim means "winged ones" or "fiery ones." We think they were pictured as "winged serpents," because the same word is used elsewhere of snakes. Strange creatures with parts of different animals were kind of common in ancient Near East thought. I do think it interesting that Satan first appears as a serpent in the Bible, and here we find angels in that form. We think of angels as basically looking like people with wings, but that's our cultural interpretation at work.

They chant, "Holy, holy, holy." God's holiness is his moral perfection and his complete separation from sin. "The whole earth is full of his glory." Glory is *CAVOD* in Hebrew, meaning "weightiness or importance." And the Temple is filled with smoke. Other places in Scripture, we find the idea of the *Shekinah*, a cloud of God's glorious presence in the Temple, accompanying his appearances.

Isaiah says, "I am done for! I'm a sinner, and I've seen God!" But the seraphim bring a coal and touch his lips to purify him. Purification of the lips was common in that culture as a representation of purification of the whole person. It occurs to me that must have been painful, a glowing hot coal to the lips. But that's the nature of purification from sin; it's not easy or painless.

God says, "Who will go?" And Isaiah answers, "I will." And he is appointed to carry a message of God's judgment on the nation for sin.

It's very different from Peter's calling. Peter is called out of his daily work. He is mending the nets, a daily chore for fishermen, after a night's work of fishing.

Jesus tells him to lower the nets. "Well, there's not much point in that Jesus. It's the wrong time of the day to catch fish. But if you say so, I'll give it a shot." There's some faith in Peter here. He is tired, and it's not the right way to do this, but if Jesus says, so, he'll try.

When he sees the miraculous catch of fish, he says to Jesus, "Go away from me. I'm not fit to be around you." But Jesus replies, "From now on, you will be fishing for people." There are two places in the Old Testament that use the idea of "fishing for people," in the prophets Jeremiah and Habbakuk. But those are both negative images, associated with judgment. Here it is used positively. Peter is commissioned to preach Jesus' good news.

And they leave their nets and go and follow Jesus.

The stories are quite different. One is a grand and glorious vision of calling. The other happens in the mundane reality of daily labor and the smell of fish. One is a calling to preach judgment; the other to preach good news.

But there is a common thread: A sense of unworthiness. God does not call us to his work because we are worthy. He calls us because he is gracious. God does not call us because we are capable of his work. He calls us because he gives us gifts and his Spirit to help us. Unless our sense of calling begins with this understanding of inadequacy and unworthiness, then we are setting ourselves up for failure. But if we begin with that understanding, then God can and will work through us. We are all people of unclean lips who live among people of unclean lips and we are all too much of sinners to be around Jesus. But he calls us anyway. Each of us and all of us, he calls us anyway. Thanks be to God for his calling to ministry and service in his Kingdom.