

Sermon – Luke 5:1-11; Isaiah 6:1-13

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Grace Lutheran Church

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“Coal Calling”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. You don't always see it coming, but you know when it happens. The wet ground, present just a second ago under your feet, is no longer there. Able to stand just a moment, you suddenly realize you need to swim. You are in the deep, perhaps in too deep, and it can come upon you suddenly, like finding yourself on your final Wordle guess with multiple possible answers remaining. I made it in four today, by the way. We've all felt it, experienced with sudden clarity that we're in over our heads. Perhaps on the first day of college, finding out that you're no longer the smartest person in the room. Or in a new job, realizing that the duties and demands are beyond you. Often, of course, we rise to the occasion. I still remember waking up that morning. Greta, our eldest child, was not yet two weeks old. I looked around the house, confused by its chaos. Why wasn't the laundry done? Why wasn't breakfast ready? In a moment it hit me; Erika's mother, who had been staying with us, had left for home the day before. The task of caring for a newborn, which seemed so manageable up until then, suddenly seemed impossible. Sure, we'd been exhausted and confused, but now it was getting real. And the reality was overwhelming. Certainly, we figured it out; more or less, anyway. Life doesn't always work out that way, of course. Sometimes the water is too deep, and that moment when we first find ourselves in the deep end can be terrifying, disorienting.

2. Our readings this morning toss us into the deep end. First, we find ourselves with Isaiah, who is not so much in over his head as he is taken up over his head. He stands, in a vision, in the heavenly throne room; nothing in his experience has prepared him for this. Six-winged seraphs throng about the throne, covering their faces lest they look directly upon the Lord. The foundations shake and the smoke swirls. Isaiah is where no human should be able to stand; to look upon the fact of God, Isaiah knows, is to die. Instead of glorying in the moment, Isaiah despairs. The holiness of the Lord points out his own unworthiness, his own sinfulness. How long will he abide after looking upon the King, the Lord of hosts?

3. Simon Peter looks God in the face today, too, although the situation and surroundings could hardly be more different. Gone are temple and throne; there's not a seraph in the sky. The Lord of hosts walks now among the people, their everyday worries and quotidian cares. Simon, exhausted from a fruitless, fishless evening of labor, is likely beside himself. Who does this Jesus think he is, this landlubber, this carpenter's kid, to give him advice about fishing? Peter's response to Jesus' instruction has been echoed through the church for twenty centuries: But we've never done it that way before! But something about Jesus convinces Peter to listen; perhaps he catches a glimpse of kingship as Jesus' gaze meets his own. "Put out into the deep water," Jesus tells them, "and let down your nets for a catch." Into the deep water. Jesus wants us to catch the memory of creation, when darkness covered the face of the deep and all was watery chaos. That water was not too deep for God; it yielded to God's creative Word. This little lake of Gennesaret is certainly no match for that same creative Word, now the incarnate Christ. This Jesus retains his power over creation, filling their nets to the breaking point, threatening to swamp their boats. Simon knows he is in the presence of the Lord, that somehow the King has left the heavenly throne room and come to Galilee's shore. In the presence of God, Simon

knows he's in too deep. Like Isaiah, he does not revel in the glory but cowers in fear. The presence of God highlights for Simon his own sin.

4. In the presence of the Lord, Isaiah and Simon discover mercy and grace. Mercy, for they are indeed sinful, yet God does not give them what they deserve. Neither man is worthy to stand before God, and God doesn't dispute that fact. They are sinners. They don't need positive reinforcement or gentle encouragement. They need the forgiveness and cleansing that come only by grace, the free gift of the God who will not leave them in their sin. Isaiah is purified by fire, with a hot coal placed upon his lips. Through that fire, his sin is blotted out. Forgiven, he is sent to preach God's hard, holy Word to the people. Simon Peter receives the grace of a Lord who will not send him away, a Lord who will instead send him with new purpose. He and his friends will catch fish no more; now they will catch people up into the reign of God.

5. Today, perhaps, we find ourselves in over our heads, a little too far from the shore for our comfort. Many of us grew up singing about being fishers of men, as the old song puts it. But the waters look different than they used to. The safe shore of the church as we remember it, from the 1950s or 80s or even just a few years ago, seems small on the horizon. Long-developing trends and declines have been exacerbated and accelerated by the pandemic. Two recent pieces in the *New York Times*, one by Tish Harrison Warren on livestream worship and the desire for people to come back to the building, the other by David Brooks on the deepening divides within American Evangelicalism, illustrate the point. Both authors write of the church wrestling with the fact that it isn't what it once was. This can be a bit scary, of course. Certainly, reading comments about these two articles on social media one sees that there is plenty of handwringing to go around. But what if the current moment is a blessing? What if the church had gotten a little too comfortable for a while? What if we are being called further from, not closer to, the shore? Perhaps the abundance God has in store for us can only be

found where the water is deep. This little craft that is the church has not been swamped yet. Upheld and propelled by Word and sacrament, we can follow where Christ leads, go where God calls.

6. For God is not afraid of the deep. The same eternal Word who spoke creation into being has entered deeply into creation itself. For our sake, he is overwhelmed by our sin and cast into the earth. But neither the depths of the earth nor hell itself could hold him for long. In his rising, Jesus lifts us up, like Isaiah and Peter before us. The old nets of sin and death are broken, no match for the creative, redeeming power of our God. We, too, have been overwhelmed by the waters; we, too, have come back to the surface, heads poking back above the baptismal flood. Isaiah and Peter were forgiven and sent. So, too, are we. Our place in this world may be changing, but this world's need for the gospel we proclaim remains. So, get up, and do not be afraid. Join in the angelic cry of praise, and then go, forgiven, with the captivating net of God's mercy and grace. God, at work in Christ, will continue to show up. You don't always see it coming, but you know what it happens. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.