

Sermon – Luke 5:1-11; Isaiah 6:1-13  
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Grace Lutheran Church  
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“Empty Netter”

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. The other day, the local rock radio station was doing a block of music from 1995. I had three simultaneous thoughts. First, “Cool! That was my freshman year of college!” Second, “Wow, 1995; that was 30 years ago!” And third, “Wait, wasn’t it only, like, seven years ago that I was in college?” Time moves faster than we’d like to imagine. But so it was that, in between amazing tracks from The Jayhawks and Soul Asylum, the station played Joan Osborne’s “One of Us.” Perhaps you remember this one. More humanistic wondering that christological confession, the singer muses about how you would react if you suddenly saw God face to face. The opening stanza gives you the idea: “If God had a name what would it be? / And would you call it to His face? / If you were faced with Him in all His glory / What would you ask if you had just one question?” It’s a nice enough song with reasonable enough questions, but I can’t help thinking that if I were suddenly confronted, face to face, with the holy presence of the Lord of heaven and earth, I wouldn’t be thinking about what I’d ask God. I think, and I stand on solid biblical foundations here, that I would be quaking in my boots.
2. At any rate, that’s where we find both Isaiah and Simon today. They find themselves in a similar predicament, if arriving there from different directions. Isaiah, minding his own business, it seems, is taken up into the heavenly throne room. Confronted with the glory of God, surrounded by six-

winged Seraphs singing holy praises, Isaiah's first thought is not, "Wow, this is cool! What should I ask God?" No. In God's presence, the first thing of which Isaiah is mindful is in own sinful unworthiness. He is lost, a man of unclean lips. What hope does he have? So, too for Simon, tending his business on the waves of Galilee. Simon and his friends have worked through the night but have nothing to show for it except empty nets. But at Jesus' command, they go back out into deep waters, lower their nets, and find them filled with a catch beyond any reasonable hope or possibility. The abundant catch must be miraculous, which places Peter in the presence of the power of God. Like Isaiah before him, he reacts not with theological reflection but with fear. In the presence of God, somehow incarnate in this Jesus before him, Simon knows his own sinfulness, first and foremost. In the presence of God, he wants only to escape, to get away.

3. Neither Isaiah nor Simon are allowed an escape, however. And neither are you. For God, One of us, stands before you today. Your unclean lips, Isaiah? Nothing a hot coal in the hands of an angel can't fix. Go, and speak God's Word. But let's look even more at Simon, this one who will soon be Peter, the Rock. Simon presents a problem of past, present, and future. In the past, just now, he has failed in his occupation. The nets with which he returns to shore are as empty as when he set out. No matter, Jesus says. Throw out the nets again. And in the present, standing in that moment before Jesus who is now clearly seen as God, Simon is aware of the thus-far defining character of his life: sin. Again, for Jesus, this presents no problem. Jesus, who is the forgiveness of sins, barely pauses here. Jesus is the hot coal for all creation, purging and restoring. And the future? It is full of fear. To which Jesus says what the Word says time and again throughout scripture: "Do not be afraid." Jesus tells Peter that the future is not in Peter's hands; it belongs to the Lord. The God we would be right to fear turns out to want the opposite from us, and to show us comfort and love. Past failure, present sin, future fear? No matter, and no problem for the God who shows up among us, as One of us. Set

it all aside and accept a call. Go, and fish for people. Catch them up in the wondrous reign of God in which sins are forgiven, in the nets in which there is room for all, and more than enough grace for each moment. Each moment in which Christ confronts and calls us.

4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, pastor and prophet during the rise and reign of the Nazis in his home nation, Germany, spoke of the moment of crisis in which Jesus stands before each of us, in all of the moments of our lives. At the beginning of his monumental work, *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer writes, "When Christ calls a [person], he bids [them] come and die." Christ comes to us in this moment and bids us to do the same, dying not as an ending, but to open up new life. Like Isaiah and Simon Peter before me, we feel woefully inadequate for this moment. This moment? What is happening? Perhaps we feel like we are on the seashore with empty nets held in trembling hands. I am ill equipped. Like Isaiah, we'd maybe rather be anywhere else. But here we are. In these last three weeks, the doors have opened wider to Christian nationalism and white supremacy. To forces that seek to smash and destroy. The ramifications, the goals, are myriad. To name just a few: the erasure of transgender people, the defunding of life-saving medical research, and the abandonment to unnecessary suffering of impoverished children throughout the world, the literal least of these who are so beloved of God, and for whom scripture commands us to care. Where are we going? Honestly, I'd rather be telling hockey stories about my kids and reminding you that Jesus loves you. I don't know how to preach to this moment. But even more, I don't know how to *not* preach to this moment. Evil abounds, as it always has. And to be clear, this is not about Democrats and Republicans, as if this were nothing more than a contest between the Chiefs and the Eagles in tonight's Super Bowl. This, Church, is about who we are, and where we stand, and the God we worship, and how we will love, and how we will witness to the Christ who gives himself to us, stands before us, calls us. And when we disagree, we trust

in the unity that Christ gifts to us. Like many of you, I am fearful. But Jesus speaks, as he always does: Do not be afraid.

5. For God, in Jesus, is One of us. God, in Jesus, gives us what we need. Friends, avail yourselves of God's abundant gifts. Feast upon the body and blood of Christ. Read the Bible daily. Pray the psalms. Encourage the saints. Give generously, to your church, yes, but also to those on the front lines, helping the least of these. Pray without ceasing. When all seems lost, remember from Isaiah that a stump is more than enough for God to work with. Be of good faith, friends, and do not be afraid. For when Christ calls you, he calls you to come and die. But Christ is the risen One, and in his dying and rising is your resurrection. Rise, Church, and live in the hope of your calling, pushing back against the darkness with light.
  
6. So how about a hockey story, and how about the gospel? Our youngest has been sick for a while and missed his game on Friday night. So, we watched it online. They took a 2-1 lead late into the game, at which point the other team pulled their goalie. We were looking at an empty net, and we found it. Jets win! Not being a fisherman, this is what I think of when I hear of empty nets. They represent not failure, but possibility, a wide-open future that no earthly force can suppress. Just so does our God open up new possibilities. As for the gospel? In spite of your failures, in spite of your sin, in spite of your fear – you are forgiven, you are loved, you are enough for this moment, for this difficult moment. Keep the faith, friends in Christ, for the God who is One of us, the God who is here, calls us in our emptiness but will not leave us empty. This God calls us from death to life, whatever happens in the meantime. Do not be afraid. Come and die. Come and live. Then go, friends, and catch up all people into the reign of Christ, in which there is room for all people. In which there is room for each person. Jesus loves you. Do not be afraid. Amen

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