

IN THE PRESENCE

Peter JB Carman, February 7, 2010, Binkley Baptist Church; Luke 5:1-11. Isaiah 6:1-13

One of the stories we have heard today about being in the unspeakable presence of the Holy fills me with curious dread. It may be because of my own limited experience of *fishing*. When I was eight years old, I lived in India. It was the custom of young boys in that time to cut bamboo poles, attach some fish-line and hook, and... go fishing in a nearby lake. I remember going with another eight year old one day. We fished for what seemed like hours... But no fish. Finally, after several worms were gone, a miracle occurred. I got one! Oh, I remember the mighty battle, that pole twitching in my hands. Finally I pulled it in---only to discover that the mighty fish was but four inches long. Far too short to eat. With the best of intentions to throw it back, I tried to get the hook out. It took a long time. And by the time that fish was free, well, he or she was also ...dead. Too small to eat, to dead to throw back. What do I do? Well there was a logical solution. Take it home, wrap it in foil, and put it in your sock drawer!

It was an elegant solution, but even an eight-year-old's sock drawer cannot long mask the evidence of a fish, a very small but very dead fish. In desperation, a few days after our fishing expedition I remember I took that fish out, still in its foil coffin. And I went outside. Where could I dispose of it? I did not know. Another beautiful solution occurred to me. I threw it up in the air over my head! SO high I threw it! The fish landed on the roof of the house. So far as I know, it is there, to this day.

As I was reading this morning's passages from scripture again, I was caught by the realization that most of the time most of us do not live as though we are in the Presence of One who is *calling* us to anything at all, and surely not to a particular deed, or occupation. We live in a time of career, not calling. The word career and the word careen come from the same place. We don't get called, we have careers—we careen wildly around the twists and turns of life, not sure where we are coming from and even less sure where we are going, only sure that we must hurry if we are to get there in time. We hide the fish in our sock drawer; we throw it up in the air. What God can catch, God can keep!

But what if we find ourselves unexpectedly in the presence of the holy, unexpectedly compelled by a force more powerful than we had conceived, a burning cleansing love deeper than we can fathom? Most of us do not really expect it to happen. Most of us, were we to experience the Presence, or a sense of divine call, why, we too would be struck not only with wonder and awe, but perhaps even downright fear--. We can relate to young Isaiah, "Woe is me... for I am a person of unclean lips, and I live in the midst of a people of unclean lips." We know where Simon Peter is coming from, when he says to Jesus "Get away from me...I'm just not good enough. You got the wrong person." We can relate....

No two experiences of being in the Presence are the same! For Isaiah it is a vision of angels, and a searing coal being pressed against his lips. For Simon Peter, it takes a big, big catch of fish, after a long night of nothing—a miracle tailor made, for someone who knows where and when to find the fish, someone ornery enough to resist every sign. Each one needs a different sign or vision, something that breaks through the routine and the expectations of daily life, to say, "Ahem. I AM HERE. I AM. And you are being called to a holy path. You are being invited to a sacred task. You are being unhooked; set free, for a word of love, a word of truth, a word of justice."

The results in the two stories, different as they are, are remarkably similar. Each of them, Isaiah on the one hand, and Simon Peter on the other, each of them is called out into the deep. Each of them is sent out into the wild and unpredictable places, where only faith can sustain. Each has a calling that means they must risk it all. Each experiences a call to radical responsiveness in the presence of One beyond all naming.

The legacy of racial and social division within the church is one of the oldest sorriest stories in our history. Over the years a number of prophets and disciples have called on the churches to dismantle this inner racism. This congregation has been part of that effort, been part of the long process of dismantling the racism within Christianity. As we gather at the communion table today, we may be tempted to think that being a church for all people, made up of people from different races and nations and histories, is an innovation. But I have been reading a little about a person and a church that paved the way back in the mid 1940's. Howard Thurman, spiritual mentor years later to one Martin Luther King Jr., went from a prestigious position at Howard University to be the pastor of a new little church start in San Francisco, *The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples*, often called simply Fellowship Church. A student of the Quaker philosopher Rufus Jones, and a conversation partner with Mahatma Gandhi, Thurman eventually became the first African American Chaplain to Boston University. But before he got there, with his life partner in ministry, the former Sue Bailey, he founded a church dedicated to erasing the barriers between people, and between humanity and God.

The words that Howard Thurman spoke at a mortgage-burning ceremony at his church are written in the masculine language of that day, but testify nonetheless to a broad vision of humanity that moves beyond barriers like gender and race, in a simple and deep way.

*“Man builds his little shelter, he raises his little wall, builds his little altar, worships his little God, organizes the resources of his little life to defend his little barrier, and he can't do it! What we are committed to here, and what many other people in other places are committed to, is very simple – that it is possible to develop a religious fellowship that it is creative in character, so convincing in quality that it inspires the mind to multiply experiences of unity – which experiences of unity become over and over and over again more compelling than the concepts, the ways of life, the sects and the creeds that separate men. We believe that in the presence of God with [God's] dream of order there is neither male nor female, white nor black, Gentile nor Jew, Protestant nor Catholic, Hindu, Buddhist, nor Moslem, but a human spirit stripped to the literal substance of itself.”**

The work of building relationships, sharing our deepest visions of the spirit, learning to trust each other and having an awkward and yet occasionally graceful time doing it—these have not changed much since the time Howard Thurman began his church. What we are committed to here at Binkley Church is not so very different, from the vision of that church. We are called to be prophets today—if prophecy means simply trying to live out a vision of how we believe God wants the world to be! We are sent here for discipleship today—if being disciples is not only words but the action of coming together at a common table, women and men, youth and elders bound by a common humanity, a common grace, in the Presence.

God is able! God is able to take an elderly woman and a nine year old child, an African American teenager and a young adult from Vietnam; some university professors and some who are graduates of the school of hard-knocks. God is able to make community of us, make hope out of us. God is able to take this businessman, this missionary woman, this law student, this neighborhood organizer, this retiree, this school child and this chaplain—and help us find our respective callings together, and send us out to break down barriers.

Each of us must sometimes find ourselves asking within, “God may be able to bring us into the Presence, able to call. But am I able? Am I able to find what it takes to respond? Will I be able to go where I am sent?” These are natural questions, the natural fears of disciples in a sinking boat, fears of a young prophet called to speak to a hard-hearted people in a hard hearted time. But again and again we have found that there is indeed One who makes us able—it is the most frequent of miracles, the most unnoticed intervention. So let us open ourselves to the presence, let us open ourselves to the call. And may all our fears and hesitations be erased by the burning touch of love, by holy love.

*From *Howard Thurman* by Jean Burden, Atlantic Monthly (1953)