

**The Palisades Presbyterian Church  
Palisades, New York**

The Fifth Sunday in Regular Time  
February 4, 2007

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1 <sup>st</sup> Readings	Isaiah 6: 1-8
Anthem	<i>Be Thou My Vision</i> by John Rutter
2 <sup>nd</sup> Reading	The Gospel of Luke 5: 1-11
Hymn #106	<i>Alleluia! Alleluia! Give Thanks</i>
Hymn #518	<i>Una Espiga/Sheaves of Summer</i>
Hymn #386	<i>O For a World</i>

*Reflection:*

In the musical language that Mozart inherited from his Baroque predecessors, the prevalence of major keys and the so-called sonata principle appeared as two striking new tropes... Their relative novelty argues that they evolved not to repress a new musical impulse but to empower it, not to stifle this pleasure in expressive contrasts but to guarantee it.

- Wye Jamison Allanbrook  
*Theology Today*, April 2006

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In Baptism – A Fire and a Voice  
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Every now and then, one of the kids I teach will explode over something with, "Jesus!" or a loud and expressive, "God!" And, every now and then, I will turn to them and say, "You know, one day you're going say that and then feel a tap on your shoulder. And, when you turn around, there will be Jesus or God, saying, "Yes?!"

Ooops!

How many of us would be dumbstruck, I wonder? What would you say to God, if you were actually face to face with the Creator and architect of the universe and that preceded it? A bit unsettling to think about, and, yet, we are always in the presence of God, just as we are here. Maybe there are good reasons for not "seeing" God face-to-face. It just might be that nothing would ever get said! So, among other things, we pray...

Still, there seems to be something built into who it is we are that, for me, at least – leaves me dangling at the edge of my senses and humanity when I do pray or seek God. I never seem to get “there,” wherever “there” is.

When I get to that point, under the best of conditions, I just let go and let God, as I hear many say. I do my best to accept the limitations of my own “whatever” and relinquish control and thought to God’s “whatever,” frequently referred to as God’s will.

But I don’t always get there easily. I have referred to it as the desert, mountaintop, dark night of the soul, shadow side, and other names. It wanders in and out of meditation that often centers in a dark and velvety -- circularly soft place where God is. From all directions people move toward that center and the closer they get – the less the words, and thoughts, and senses have any meaning or need. A new language emerges – the language with no words – just of nearness and presence. It is the closest I have come to knowing – on some cosmic level – to where it is I am heading. Everything I can imagine is in the nearness. It is the path, the Way, I think, regardless of the direction from which we come.

It is from that feeble vision of my own that I enter into Isaiah’s words....

Isaiah’s revelation in this morning’s first reading is taking place most likely during a cultic vigil or prayer service outside the Holy of Holies – the innermost sanctuary of the temple. Somewhere in the prayer and chanting and incense burning, his prayers of “God, God, God...” were answered with an illumined tap on the shoulder. The smoke clears and he is suddenly and dramatically in the presence of God and God’s company, and is almost simultaneously struck by the rapture and then immediately aware of his transparency and nakedness before God...and he feels ashamed, and guilty, and unworthy to be in a such a place, and probably not just a little frightened that the sheer magnificence and energy of God would eclipse his being into nothingness.

Even Moses was never in such a place.

And then, according to the narrative, an amazing thing happens. One of the *seraphs*, literally the burning ones, an angel of the first order usually portrayed with the head of a child – picks up one of the flat rocks that were heated to warm the altar and touches it the mouth of Isaiah – not just calling forth his voice, but cleansing him in a way that is forgiving, preparatory, and welcoming into the company of God and angels. “Come, join us.”

And then God, speaking to the all assembled in this heavenly vision asks, “Whom shall I send into the world...into the brokenness...the hurt...the hopeless...whom shall I send? And Isaiah, maybe surprising himself, Isaiah with his new-found heart, and spirit, and voice and forgiveness says, “Send me! Over here God! Send me!”

It is a wonderful, powerful, dramatic Scripture narrative. And it is powerful for other reasons, as well – one of them being that I think we know a bit of Isaiah in our own hearts. I think we know his sense of humility before God, and even his quick yearning to serve God. His and our call, if you will.

We often refer to “calls” in religious ways, but it’s more than that. Looking back, I think in the variety of each of the things I have done, many were really calls. The decisions I made were responses to more than I knew about the movings of heart and spirit.

Some of them were pretty impulsive, rapid leaps, escapes – sometimes, with little or at least not too much thought. They seemed like a good idea or cool thing to do; they got me out of where I was, so off I went.

In my early twenties, I was living in New York, just finishing college, and the sales company I was working for offered me, this kid from the Bronx, a job in Wisconsin. “Sure, why not!” And before I knew it, to the amazement and amusement of many, I found myself in the Fox River Valley, 30 miles south of Green bay, living in small towns like Neenah, Menasha, Appleton and Oshkosh – renting a home at one point on a lake named Winnebago that froze and shifted like an earthquake during the winter, and became a dense hatching place for the delight of the white bass run in the spring – lake flies. Lake flies that covered everything like a mushy gray snow for weeks. But you know, the people I met there, the things I have learned, all became very important to me in my life. So, even though I didn’t know it – I think of it today as a call, on the path, so to speak.

As I got a bit older, the calls got a bit more involved, in some ways. There were implication to changes and moves that slowed me down, caused me to hesitate, hide, even run a bit. As a pretty-much closeted person who was gay (I still am), I had arranged many things in my life at that time – or so I thought – to insulate me from the harshness and judgmental nature of society – and yes, especially the church. In fact, it became so painful to be in a place each week where I was sure if they knew who I really was that they would chase me out of town – that I eventually just left. I dangled there for quite some time, needing to “re-find God” in ways that were not judgmental or destructive. Even that, I think, was a call – a call out to that desert or mountaintop. There were no answers in the faith tradition of my birth, other than of the most ugly, if well-meaning kind.

Even in the midst of all the turmoil, like the talons of an eagle in Kazentakis’ Report to Greco, God would not let go of me and this idea I had from two or three years old of being a priest or a minister. Still, I questioned and argued and resisted. I knew Isaiah’s sense of unworthiness. And, I know, too, that a big part of me didn’t want or know how to be who I was and gay and find a church.

Then God, as God often does, puts us in places and gives us the chances to find honest and open ways to work it all out; if we are willing to take the risks and

willing to accept the fact that the outcomes may, indeed, be quite different from what we expect. It is the path we are offered and God's assurance of presence. Pretty much – that's it. Until that is enough, for me anyway, real and meaningful transformation coughs and sputters along.

Maybe it was like that for the disciples until the day they were called and followed. Maybe there was some coughing and sputtering for some of them, too, that preceded answering.

For example, in Luke's Gospel this morning, Simon Peter – who it is believed actually knew Jesus for a while before following him as a disciple, Simon Peter suddenly realized who Jesus was when the 153 fish nearly burst the nets. And immediately he says, "Go away, Jesus, for I am a sinful man." "Woe is me! For I am a person who is unclean." Cough sputter, sputter, cough!

And Jesus says to Simon Peter, you have to think with a bit of a loving chuckle, "Do not be afraid, Simon...c'mon we have work to do."

Cough, sputter, sputter cough...Whom shall I send? Send me...

Another piece to this commitment of being Christian and a practitioner/follower of the teachings of Jesus – is risk. Being a Christian calls us into risk, for me, balanced only by the knowledge that once I have made a decision to turn my life and will over to God's care – I have nothing to worry about. And further balanced by the experience of learning just how important taking certain risks is in my being whoever it is God has intended me to be.

And, as I alluded to before, becoming disciples, living into discipleship means letting go of the outcomes to a large degree. It is continuing to listen, to discern, as we follow the call or path – in any endeavor.

In my mid-seminary years, at some point in the midst of a growing turmoil around the lives of gay people and the church, and wondering if and when I would ever get ordained, what was I doing – I suddenly realized that it was not about I would ever be ordained. In fact, once I realized further that I didn't need to be ordained – I was set free to be whom I was, with the voice that I felt called to use.

My whole idea of moving toward ordination suddenly wasn't the goal. If it happened fine, but staying on the path, a day at a time – that was and remains my call, whether as a teacher, here, as a friend, mentor, or anything else I may find myself doing or being. The outcome is out of my hands. I never imagined I would be here, or for that matter most of everything else that has happened in my life. And so, I leave it with the one who calls and wait for the phone to ring, wondering what could possibly be next!

We really get that here. We have come to understand through the Scriptures and God's own revelatory process in our own lives that this we are part of an ongoing endeavor and procession of others who as Christians have been called to serve a world with genuine, loving, and radical hospitality.

We get it that marginalization is simply not – better – cannot be -- a part of our way, whatever others may feel. We love our critics and welcome them, but cannot be who it is they wish us to be. The God we know simply would not allow it!

We get it that dehumanization has never been or could never be a part of the God we know through Scriptures. And we know and believe that the Jesus who walks with us commands us – calls us – to a world where there are no second-class aspects to God's great and wonderful creation.

Isaiah, the other prophets, Jesus – all of them were called into oppressive dominating societies. They took the shame and guilt that had been used by the governments and religious structures of the day to dominate and they said, "No!"

He, Jesus, taught us that to be his followers we needed not only the courage to say, "Yes!" but even more so to say, "No, no more, never again" to the ways of violence and exclusion based on any measure of our sacred being, including the God-given mystery and intimacy of our sexuality. It is the continuation of something begun long ago.

In early January, we read about Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. We talked about how the times then were ripe with oppression and how the waves of the Jewish movement against the Roman government brought resistance from many corners of the Jewish communities. We considered how John was this sort of "Wildman" to many; this radical who was baptizing people into a community that clearly stated that their allegiance was to God – not to any government.

"Do what you will to us, we will not be quieted or quelled," they might have said in their won words. And one day, down a hill toward that lake came Jesus. When he walked into that water and was baptized, he, too, made that statement to all who saw it and heard about it later that "He" was one of them, one drawn into the water by the Baptizer.

Jesus' action and baptism was not a call to war, but it was a sign of his ministry that was at its core a revolution, a radical change from what was -- to what needed to be. Whatever the risk.

Jesus said this in earlier readings this month, remember?

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and

recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, <sup>19</sup>to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Such is the mission of this church and I suspect of each of us in our own ways and common walks. We are involved in ministries of imagination, as Walter Bruggerman calls it: "conjuring and proposing alternative futures to the single one the dominant society wishes to urge upon us as the only thinkable one.

And so, we gather here each week knowing that, believing all these things, highlighting one area or more from week to week, weaving it all into a fabric that we wear as a loose garment, never too tightly so that we can readily react and respond to God's call – but always warmed by one another and Jesus, in whom all these things are fulfilled.

Amen.