

EPIPHANY 5C/LECTIONARY 5

February 7, 2010

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Isaiah 6:1—8

Psalm 138

I Corinthians 15:1—11

Luke 5:1—11

The call stories of our Biblical prophets are some of my favorite stories in the Bible.

Prophets and prophecy in the Bible are not at all what our popular conception of them are. Prophets are *not* those who have a divine connection to God enabling them to see the future. Prophets are those whom God has commissioned to go and speak His word to the people.

When we take a close look at the stories of the prophets in the Bible we find that the future is not pre-determined by God; the prophet is *not* simply declaring what the future will be. The prophet declares to the people what the future will be only if they don't change their ways. The people still have free will; they can choose to do what God declares through the prophet, or not. The people are still very much in charge of their future.

Today's Old Testament reading from Isaiah is yet another of my favorite call stories. But it's not one of my favorite call stories for the reason you might think. I greatly admire that Isaiah was able to so fully and immediately embrace his call.

Today I would like to tell you my call story. I would normally avoid injecting so much of myself into a sermon, because, after all, we're not here to talk about me – we're here to talk about God, and what God has done and will do for us. But I think it's important for you to know How I came to be standing here as your pastor today.

First of all, let me say that this story of God's activity in my life is very much the result of looking backward through my life. Hindsight is, indeed 20/20. Events in my life that led to my being called as your pastor were very rarely clear in the moment. A part of the process which leads to ordination is that all seminarians are required to do some in-depth soul-searching to discern how God has been active in our lives. This story is one that has taken me years to understand.

My story begins on October 17, 1965, when I was baptized. I have to point to that date because there has never been a time in my life when I did not feel God's presence. I must credit God's constant presence to the gift of the Holy Spirit that was given to me in baptism.

I was always a very strange child where religion was concerned. I loved reading the Bible. I loved talking about the Bible. I loved going to church. I loved singing the liturgy. I loved Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, and Confirmation classes – both times I took Confirmation instruction. I finished my

first round of instruction when I was 11, but the Council decided I was too young to be Confirmed. So I took the next round and was confirmed at the age of 13.

Now you might think I was well on my way to becoming a minister at that point. But shortly after my Confirmation my parents divorced, just before my 14th birthday. My mother and I moved from rural Kentucky to Honolulu, Hawaii. We could take only what we could carry in our four suitcases. Two of the things that went with me were my Bible and the brand-new *Lutheran Book of Worship* that had been presented to me at my Confirmation.

In Hawaii God placed people in my life to try to keep me on the right path. The first was the young man who was manager of the small hotel where we stayed our first month. I spent every afternoon sitting on the floor of Mark's office where we read and discussed the Bible.

More conversation partners arrived on my doorstep one day when I was 15, in the form of Mormon missionaries. We spent many hours talking about the Bible. Shortly before my 16th birthday I became a member of the Latter-Day Saints. I got myself out of bed every weekday morning at 5 a.m. so I could attend what they called “seminary,” a daily 6:30 a.m. class for teenagers. I progressed very rapidly, and was even permitted to participate in one of their temple rituals. But at some point my good old Lutheran training kicked in, and I realized that there was

something about Mormon theology that just didn't ring true with the way I read the Bible. And so I left. And I continued my spiritual wandering, being fed only by the weekly chapel services at my high school.

My wandering continued for a few years until I met John Mark, himself a child of a Lutheran pastor. I had never realized how important it would be for me to have a life-mate that shared the same beliefs as me until I met John Mark. We were married in the Lutheran church where he grew up, and attended church in our university town until he graduated and we moved on with the Army.

It was during John Mark's tour in Germany that we met Pastor Seibel. Many of you will remember him – he came and preached the sermon at my installation service here. Pastor Seibel was our first chaplain in Germany. I became very active in the Protestant Women of the Chapel organization, attended Bible studies, and was elected to the Council of our Lutheran chapel congregation as Director of Christian Education. In 1991 Pastor Seibel left Germany, returning here to the States to become pastor of a church in Phillipsburg.

While we were in Germany I completely threw myself into the Army life. I worked hard at being the best Army wife I could be. I received all kinds of volunteer awards and was the president-elect of the Officers' Wives Club for the 1992-1993 year, the most junior officer's wife to ever be elected to that position at

our post. Life was looking really good. John Mark had the Army career he had always wanted, and I seemed to be the perfect trophy Army wife.

Then came that day in early April 1992 that I received my call. I came home one afternoon after a full day of volunteer activities, only to find John Mark home early. So I said, "What are you doing home early?" He looked at me sadly and replied, "I didn't make it." I said, "What do you mean, You didn't make it?" He said, "I got passed over for promotion."

It was in that moment that I heard a voice, more real than anything I can describe, say, "That's because I want you to go to seminary." I said, "That's got to be a mistake!" John Mark, thinking that I was responding to him, again said, "I didn't make it. I'm being put off active duty." But, in truth, I was responding to the voice I'd just heard. That *HAD* to be a mistake.

While my head was reeling from the voice I'd just heard, John Mark's whole life has just come crashing down around him. All he'd ever wanted to do was be in the Army, and suddenly, that was gone. All I'd worked for was gone, too. I'd never envisioned another future than being the perfect Army wife. Everything we'd worked for, everything we'd dreamed, gone, in the blink of an eye.

I didn't tell John Mark about the voice, about the message. I didn't tell him until we were back in the States, about four months later. I didn't tell him because I

knew what his response would be. When I finally told him he said, “Why would God take everything away from me just so you could go to seminary???” I didn't have an answer for that.

The next few years were pure struggle for us. John Mark was unemployed and underemployed. After spending six months working with him on his job search, our money was gone and I needed to get a job. I remembered the voice, but the message faded with time. There was no way I could go to seminary, since I hadn't even finished my bachelor's degree. And where we lived, there was no college where I could finish my bachelor's degree.

I eventually decided that God had to have been wrong. I settled myself into pursuing a career. It looked like I had a good chance of working my way into a professional position with my organization, based on a combination of my college credits and experience. And yet, every time a position came open, I was passed over in favor of someone who had a college degree and no experience. Saying I was frustrated would be putting it mildly.

Even though several years and many miles had passed between us, Pastor Seibel and I maintained our friendship. During one phone conversation he called me something that wounded me to my core. I was complaining bitterly about how I wasn't getting ahead in my career when he suddenly interrupted me and said,

“Jonah! When are you going to stop trying to avoid going to Ninevah?!”

Do you all remember the story of Jonah? He was the prophet that God called to go to Ninevah and warn the people. He tried to avoid his call, going so far as to get on a boat going in the opposite direction.

Pastor Seibel calling me “Jonah” really hurt. But it caught me up short, exactly what he'd intended. It was then I gave up my career aspirations and started living day by day. Maybe God hadn't been wrong after all?

A few years after that John Mark's company transferred him to Northern Virginia. *FINALLY* I would be able to finish my bachelor's degree! The only decision remaining was what to major in. I had previously done most of my coursework in psychology; it would have made sense for me to simply finish that degree. But the university I attended had a special program for older students who have very specific career goals in mind, an individualized studies program.

Working with my advisor, a professor of psychology who also just so happened to be a former Lutheran minister, I crafted a degree plan in pre-seminary studies. The day I went to file that degree plan was one of the scariest days of my life. I knew that if for some reason this seminary thing didn't work out, I'd have a worthless degree. I was literally shaking as I handed my degree plan over at the college office. I felt as if I was throwing myself off a cliff and saying, “God! Catch

me!!!” But as soon as it was done I felt a sense of lightness and freedom that I have never felt before or since. I knew I had made the right decision.

Of course, you can all figure out the rest of the story. I was accepted into the ordination process, entered seminary, and graduated. In all, it was just a few days short of 16 years from the time I first heard that voice until I began the process to become your pastor.

Looking back, I can see that my call to the ordained ministry was always there. I seem to have been given the necessary gifts from an early age. But life circumstances and my own stubbornness kept me from recognizing and heeding that call. Perhaps if I had been a bit more attuned to God's will my life would not have taken the circuitous path it has. Pastor Seibel was right – I was Jonah.

But what I do know for certain is that God has brought together all of my life's experiences to equip me for this call. In the words of my dear aunt, one of my great heroes of the faith, from her favorite Bible verse, Romans 8:28 – And we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose.

My being here as your pastor is not the culmination of my journey. It is simply a new chapter. No longer is it about what God is doing in my life; it is a new chapter about what God is doing for all of us together.

All of us are called – in the words of Jeremiah – “from the womb,” through baptism, to lives of service to God. Our lives of service are not just lives of religious devotion in prayer and worship, but also lives of service to our neighbors.

I know many of you have had questions about this “Worship Working Group” that I’m forming. You’re asking just what this is about, and what changes you might expect. My answer to that is: I don’t know. If I had an outcome in mind there would be no purpose in our studying together, researching together, or talking together about what God might be calling our congregation to do. If I had an outcome in mind, then it would simply be my vision; it would not be *OUR* vision.

What I *do* have in mind is that anyone who feels that God might be calling our congregation to new ministries should come together to attempt to discern what that purpose might be. I don’t intend for this to be just a few people making decisions on behalf of everyone. I want anyone and everyone who wants to be involved to be a part of the process.

So, what is God calling us, together, to do in this new chapter? I don’t know. But I am certain that God has some special ministry in mind for our congregation, and it is up to us to attempt to discern and follow that call.

I wish it were as simple as the heavens opening and a voice booming out, “I want you to [BLANK],” but it’s rarely that simple. In fact, in my experience, the

only time God speaks so openly is when I'm being just plain stupid and failing to discern all the signs. But I am also certain that when we earnestly and prayerfully work together, God's purpose for us will be revealed.

Amen.

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