

February 4, 2007

Isaiah 6:1-8 and Luke 5:1-11

Dr. Lewis F. Galloway

“Mystery on the Loose”

For the tired fishermen, it was just the beginning of another all too ordinary day. They had spent the whole night fishing from their boats with no results. Simon Peter, James and John were exhausted from the work and from the lack of sleep. They were washing their nets on the shore when Jesus got in Simon's boat and asked him to row out from the shore. The weary fisherman listened as Jesus taught the crowds.

How many days do we wake up already tired from the demands of the previous day? Every day, I talk with busy working parents who never seem to catch up on their rest. It is not a matter of being just physically tired.

I see people who are emotionally and spiritually worn out. Too often, we seem to go through the motions of our daily routines as if we are living in someone else's dream. Work feels like unproductive drudgery. With a sigh, we wash the empty nets of our labors and wonder why we do it. We look back at the week, the month, the year and, maybe, even the whole of our lives and we wonder what we have accomplished. When I was in seminary, a professor who had spent many years as a parish minister taught the Introduction to Ministry course. This wise teacher told the students to remember one thing in the ministry. He said, “Always cut your own grass. That way, you'll be able to see something you have accomplished that week.”

We wish it were that simple. We have a nagging feeling that something is not right; but we just can't put a finger on the problem. When these thoughts are too much with us, we look for ways to lose ourselves, distract ourselves or pamper ourselves. We search for a treasure we call “my time.” Yet, the way I spend “my time” often only beguiles me, anesthetizes me or leads me further from what I really need. Rather than feeling restored to life by my leisure, I find I have numbed myself to death.

We long for some sense of God, some sense of holy purpose in what we do and how we live. When we hear the words of Jesus, sometimes I think we listen with only half a brain. The other half is thinking about supper, the Super Bowl or some half-forgotten sunset. Something happened a long time ago to awaken Simon, James, John and the other fishermen to the presence of God in their lives. Something extraordinary happened in the midst of their ordinary labors.

After he finished teaching, Jesus told the fishermen to cast their nets into the deep water. Simon was reluctant to do it because he had fished all night and caught nothing. Notice what Simon said, “But at your word I will let down the nets.” He was willing to be directed by Jesus even when he doubted the outcome. When the nets were ready to burst and the boats were about to sink from the weight of the fish, Simon knew he was in the presence of something or, perhaps, I should say someone, holy.

Simon cried out, “Depart from me for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”

Mystery was on the loose that day. There, in the midst of the ordinary routine of labor, something new was happening.

When I hear the words of Simon, my mind is drawn back to the words of the prophet Isaiah in the

Temple. As he had done a hundred times before, Isaiah was simply taking his turn, doing his job in the Temple. While he was serving in the Temple, Isaiah had a vision of God. The holiness of

God filled the Temple. Isaiah cried out, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

Mystery was on the loose that day. It was the divine presence that awakened in Isaiah a sense of his own sinfulness and need. What makes us most “unclean” is our inability to catch sight of God in the midst of the ordinary moments of life. When we lose sight of God, we lose sight of ourselves, who we are, whose we are and why we do what we do. We end up going through the motions of life, washing empty nets, trimming the Temple lamps, living somebody else’s dream and offering ourselves to the idols of our making.

In “The Quotidian Mysteries,” Kathleen Norris notes that “God loves us - loves us so much that the divine presence is revealed even in the meaningless workings of daily life.” (pp.21-22) In fact, it is precisely in the repeated rhythms of daily life that we come face to face with God. Doing laundry, caring for a patient, cooking a meal or maintaining a marriage can be holy work when it is offered to God as an act of praise. Norris writes. “The true mystics...are not those who contemplate holiness in isolation, reaching godlike illumination in serene silence, but those who manage to find God in a life filled with noise, the demands of other people and relentless daily duties that can consume the self.” (p.70)

On the Sea of Galilee, it wasn’t just the nets that were about to break open with the weight of a miraculous catch of fish. Simon Peter’s life and world were breaking open too. It wasn’t just the incense that was filling the air that day in the Temple. The air was filled with the beat of wings, the voices of the heavenly host and the astonished cries of Isaiah. God is present everywhere; but we do not always see God.

God is here - longing to catch our attention, wanting to touch our lives with grace and desiring to call us into new life. All we see is a room with stained glass windows, someone nodding off and two people holding hands. All we hear is someone singing off-key, a muffled cough to hide a giggle and the sound of our own thoughts. God is present in the world of our daily labors; but all we see is the business deal, the commute to the office, the blank faces that pass us in the hall and bedtime with the children. God is not only here, but also in the world where we live our lives. The holiness of God is present in and through all these things and in all the seemingly ordinary experiences of our lives.

Yet, we don’t let ourselves see the fire of God’s amazing love.

The Persian poet, Rumi, captured this sense of the hidden presence of God in his poem, “God’s Joy,” which I have shared with some of you.

*“God’s joy moves from unmarked box to unmarked box,
from cell to cell.
As rainwater, down into flower bed.
As roses, up from ground.
Now it looks like a plate of rice and fish,
Now a cliff covered with vines,
Now a horse being saddled.
It hides within these,
Till one day it cracks them open.”*

The unexpected catch of fish cracked open Simon's life. His life was never the same again. The fish weren't the only things that were caught that day. Peter, James, John and the other fishermen were caught in the net of Jesus. God's joy hides in all the routine activities and the ordinary moments of our lives, ready to crack us open.

When we take hold of God's presence or, better yet, when God's presence takes hold of us, it changes us. We hear God's call. God speaks to each one of us. God calls each one of us to follow Jesus. Every Christian has a calling. I do not mean that that every Christian is called to the ministry of word and sacrament, but that each one of us is called to follow Christ and serve Christ through our daily labors. We are to use our lives to point to the holy mystery at loose in the world.

Wherever we go and whatever we do, our lives are vessels of God's grace, temples of the Holy Spirit, ambassadors of Christ and stewards of the gospel. Simon Peter, James and John followed Jesus all the way to Jerusalem and beyond. They were never freer than when they were most bound to him; they were never more alive than when they gave their lives for him; they were never richer than when they sacrificed everything for him.

Our call is to be most fully the people God created us to be. To discover our true selves, we may have to stumble in the dark awhile or face some hard times of uncertainty before we come to the light.

Sometimes, we forget that the hard experiences, mistakes and even failures of our lives are a necessary part of discovering who God wants us to be. Parker Palmer writes in his book, "Let Your Life Speak,"

"Vocation [calling] does not come from a voice 'out there' calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice 'in here' calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God." (p.10)

Palmer also tells a Hasidic tale that reveals our foolish tendency to become somebody we were not created to be: "Rabbi Zusya, when he was an old man, said, 'In the coming world, they will not ask me: "Why were you not Moses?" They will ask me: "Why were you not Zusya?"'" (p. 11)

A part of what it means to have a calling is to know God's presence in the ordinary moments of our lives. It is to bow down and worship, not a God who is unseen and distant, but a God who is known in Jesus and is closer to us than the air we breathe. To know that we are called to follow Jesus means that we know our lives have a purpose, what we do has meaning and no moment is ever lost. The holy God is with us even in the most ordinary moments of our lives. As Frederick Buechner wrote in

"The Sacred Journey," "I think of my life and of the lives of everyone who has ever lived, or will ever live, as not just journeys through time but as sacred journeys." (p.6)

Mystery is on the loose in the world. There is a sacred and mysterious journey that belongs to you and to no one else. Isaiah was in the Temple when he caught sight of his journey. Simon Peter was on the sea hauling in nets teeming with fish when he found his path. The journey unfolds in the ordinary, daily routines and rituals that make up our lives.