

ISAIAH 6:1-8 (p. 557)

FEBRUARY 10, 2019

LUKE 5:1-11 (p. 835)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Open our ears Lord, so that we might hear your Word. Quicken our hearts Lord, so that we might discern your will. And still our minds Lord, so that we might understand the depth of your love. These things we ask in Jesus' Name, Amen.

"CALLED"

The guy on the news this week said, "There are now more active Facebook users, worldwide, than there are Christians, 3.32 Billion!" So, I Googled it. He is right. Facebook has Christianity beat by about a Billion followers! So, in all reality, who has the most influence in our world today? Who is taken more seriously?

I titled today's sermon, "Called". And I did it, well, for obvious reasons. That has been the core theme of the Lectionary lately! Last week, we talked about the call of a reluctant young man named Jeremiah. He didn't feel especially qualified, remember? And yet, he went anyway. Then we witnessed how Jesus' Call, was rejected in His own hometown.

Today, we heard that "in the year King Uzziah died," about 740 B.C., a man named Isaiah was given a vision of God. God's Greatness and Glory were revealed to him, God's Mystery and Power! Isaiah was then called to witness to that! Scholars say Isaiah was a Scribe at the time, working in the Royal Palace in Jerusalem. A respectable career, to be sure! But God had something else in mind. Simon Peter, roughly 770 years later, also received a call from God. He too witnessed God's Greatness and Glory, His Mystery and Power! He was a fisherman at the time, in the Region of Galilee. Also, a respectable career. But again, God had something else in mind.

So, I title today's sermon "Called". But maybe a better follow-up sermon might be "What Do We Do Once We're Called?"! Or how about, "The Purpose of Being Called", you know, "The Purpose of the Church?" That has a certain ring to it! "What is the Purpose of the Church?" How would you answer that question?

We have a Mission Statement here at Blaine. It states that, "Our purpose, at Blaine Christian Church, is to live and share the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ through the guidance of the Holy Spirit." I like that! It's very Trinitarian! And it goes on!

"Together, we seek to learn, teach, hear, minister, support, grow and worship as a community of faith. As Christ's Disciples, we accept the call to reach out with God's love to those outside the church. Thus, as part of the Church Universal, we intend to serve both the physical and spiritual needs of our immediate community and the world. To this end we commit ourselves to witness and serve in the fellowship and tradition of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)."

It's lofty, right? And certainly biblical. Maybe a bit vague in detail, or universal in scope? Maybe intentionally so? It's good for a Church to have a Mission Statement, don't you think, a clearly defined "reason for being"! It sets the stage. It orients us, points us in the right direction, right up front, like a map or a GPS at the beginning of a journey! We are called, clearly, called by God! We are called for a purpose, both as individuals, and collectively as a Church! But exactly, does that call mean? What is our journey supposed to look like?

That's one of those tough questions, isn't it? It's difficult to answer. You know the kind of question I'm talking about. "Daddy, what does it mean to be a man?" or, "Mommy, where do babies come from".

It's not that we don't know the answers, or at least know where to find them. It's just that the question is so important, so critical, that you want to make absolutely sure you get the answer right! You also want to share that answer in a way that your listener can hear!

So, let me ask you one more time, what is the Purpose of the Church? Why did God call us together? Why did God call Jeremiah or Isaiah? Why did Jesus call Peter, or James, or John? Why did the Holy Spirit call you?

Jesus is preaching the Word of God in today's lesson. There are all kinds of curious people listening in. Then Jesus gets into a boat, often a metaphor for the Church, and continues teaching and preaching the Word of God! What does that say? Then Jesus says, "Put out into deep water"! Imagine the reaction from the fishermen. "There is no fish out there! We've tried! We've fished all night! Why put in the effort when we already know the outcome! It's not the right time Jesus! Fishing is done at night! We're experts you know! We've done this our entire life! We know what we are doing! Deep water! Put out into deep water? Why deep water! We like it here in the shallows, closer to shore! It's easier to quit here! More familiar! More comfortable! Deep water is unknown water!"

You know, I watched part of the Super Bowl last week. It was late, and on a Sunday, but I watched! I wasn't overly impressed though! But I did hear someone say, "The game is decided by those who get in the game, not by those who sit in the stands! As important as Draft Day is, what matters, is what happens on the field!" So, we are "Called", right? We've been through "Draft Day". We are here now, "out on the field", standing on the shore "tending our nets"! So, "what's our play"?

The “goal” is to make “God Known in the World”! Through those, I might add, who God has called! The “goal” is to help people have a personal relationship with Him, through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! The “goal” is to share the Good News that God loves them, loves us, and has made a way for all of us to be reconciled with Him! The goal, then, includes risking “deep water”, and “torn nets”! Risking boats, that may even become “so full, that they are in danger of sinking”! The goal, is to achieve a miraculous “catch of fish” by listening to, and trusting in what Jesus says!

Isn’t “making God known in the world” why Abraham and his family were called, way back in Genesis? They were set apart, right, for a Holy purpose! It’s why the Israelites were called out of captivity in Egypt. They too were set apart, again for a Holy purpose! That’s why God gave us Laws to live by. To set us apart as His People, so that we would be “in the world, but not of it”! And when we got off track, it’s why God sent us Prophets to help guide us back! And when we missed all of that, God came Himself, remember, in the flesh!

“Making God known in the world”, and “helping people into a personal relationship with Him”, is why Jesus called the Twelve! It’s why He founded the Church! It’s why He called you and me! But what does that look like? Seriously? Does it change over time? If you were going to frame a picture of the Church, how would that picture look?

That might be a fun experiment sometime! We could each study Scripture, look at the Church over the last two-thousand-years, see how God has used immoral and insignificant people to further His cause, to actually fish for people! We qualify, you know. We too are immoral and insignificant people, people called to fish for others!

We could all bring in our own individual pictures of the church, and assemble them together like a jigsaw puzzle! We might notice that this piece fits with that one nicely. Or that those two pieces don't really go together at all. Maybe we would need two jigsaw puzzles. One that shows what the Church is like. And a second, that demonstrates how God intends for it to be! I wonder if we would have a consensus? On either picture? I wonder if we'd learn anything, from comparing the two?

We have a number of examples of "Church" in Scripture, as well as down through the ages. Some of these are absolutely wonderful too! But there are others, right, examples of dysfunctional, or slightly off-course Churches! Churches that Peter, and Paul, and James, even had to write letters to, in order to help them get back on course!

Why were we called? What is our purpose for being, the purpose of the Church? I just got an invitation this week, from the Bethel Seminary in Redding, California to come to a conference and discuss that question. There are all kinds of books and DVD lessons out there on the subject. Some of our Sunday School Classes, and Bible Studies are right now considering that question! Lots of the big Mega Churches are currently rethinking, reevaluating how, and why, they do Church! Let's see what Jesus says.

In Matthew 22 Jesus shares The Greatest Commandment, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind". He also shares the Second Greatest Commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself". And then in Matthew 28 He gives us The Great Commission, "Go and make Disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have Command you". It sounds a lot like our Mission Statement, right? For a reason, I might add!

It's pretty straight-forward, really. Self-evident even! If Christ's Church loves the Lord our God with every fiber of our being, and loves our neighbors as ourselves—and if we go and make Disciples of all nations, and Baptize them into the faith community, in the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit—and teach them, as well as teach ourselves the things of God, teach obedience to God's commands—then we have indeed fulfilled our purpose and design!

Let me say that again. If Christ's Church loves the Lord our God with every fiber of our being, and loves our neighbors as ourselves—and if we go and make Disciples of all nations, and Baptize them into the faith community, in the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit—and teach them, as well as teach ourselves the things of God, teach obedience to God's commands—then we have indeed fulfilled our purpose and design!

But if we don't, if we don't do that, then there is no reason for the Church to exist! If we don't, then we are in danger of becoming a Hobby, or Pastime, a Country Club, something to add to our date-book, on an equal footing with the Bridge Club, or Golf League, or the Rotary! If we just stay in shallow water, then Jesus just becomes a Friend or a Hero, rather than the Lord and Master of our lives! We are not here to simply keep ourselves in business! We are not here to hand on the church, intact, to the next generation! Institutional maintenance is not what we were designed to do, or be about!

Another thing that happened this week, was an email that came from the Barna Group, a Christian Research Firm that I subscribe to. It was an article on how “Almost Half of Practicing Christian Millennials Say Evangelism is Wrong”! Half, of young believers, confessing Christians, now think that sharing their faith is wrong! That's frightening!

You see, we are clearly called in Scripture to Love the Lord, to Love our Neighbor, to go and make Disciples, to Baptize them into the Community of Faith, to Teach ourselves and others, how to be Obedient!

Let me break that down. “Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and with all of your soul, and with all of your mind”! That’s Worship. One primary purposes of the Church, is to come together in Praise and Thanksgiving, offering up songs and prayers to our God. Not out of a sense of duty, mind you. But because we Love the Lord!

“Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the people crowding around him and listening to the Word of God.” Jesus was preaching the Word, illustrating what it had to say, so that people could understand their God. Jesus and the Disciples were doing church. Our Isaiah passage says, “I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted. Above him were Seraphs, calling to one another, Holy! Holy! Holy! is the Lord Almighty!” The angels were praising and worshipping the Almighty! The angels were doing church! We are called to announce the Word of God, to Praise and Glorify God’s Holy Name!

The second purpose of the Church, is to love our neighbors as ourselves. That’s the concept of ministry, and a great way to make God’s Love known in the world. The Church exists to reach out to the needs and hurts of this world, in the Name of Jesus Christ! Those needs are physical. But also, emotional, and moral, relational and spiritual. If the Church is going to fulfill its God-given purpose, then we simply must find ways to minister to all of these needs!

We can open up our church, and our homes. We can stop to help the man who has slipped on the ice by his mailbox, or the one broken-down alongside the road. We can help that lady at the store put her groceries in the car!

We can listen when someone around us needs to talk. We can help someone cope with a stressful day. We can check on people, and see how they are doing! We can stand up for those who are not strong enough to stand up for themselves, visit those who are in prison, walk beside those who have stumbled! We can speak up when our nation is moving in the wrong direction. We can reach out when we see someone wandering away, heading off, down a scary path. That is what the Prophet Micah was talking about, right, what the Lord requires! “Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God”? Being created in the image of God means that we reflect the image of God! So, who do people see, when they look at you?

The third purpose of the Church is to go and make Disciples. That’s why that Barna Report is so frightening! A Disciple is “one who follows”. We are called to Evangelize, called to be Ambassadors of Christ, called to share the Good News of Salvation in Jesus Christ! Yes, to be clear, we are called to bring people into the Church family! I know, that in this day of pluralism and acceptance, that that concept is not always a popular position! But if we truly believe that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life, like Scripture says, not just “one of the many paths to God”, then shouldn’t we share that Truth with others?

In both of our passages this morning, God is calling his people to go out into the world and proclaim his Word! Jesus calls a group of fishermen to go out, into deep water, to give up their boats and nets and become fishers of men! And God called Isaiah to go to the Children of Israel and tell them just how upset He is with them, to bring the Bad News of their immanent destruction! Neither of those calls would have been easy to answer. Nor is our call to evangelism. But again, there is no doubt, evangelism is a Primary Purpose of the Church!

Let me remind you that neither Simon Peter, nor Isaiah, thought that they were good enough to do God's bidding! Isaiah said, "Woe is me, I'm ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips!" And Simon Peter, falling to his knees said, "Go away from me Lord; I am a sinful man!" Remember what Jeremiah said last week? "Ah sovereign Lord, I don't know how to speak. I am only a child." I guess if we feel "inadequate", as a messenger of Gospel, then maybe we are actually in pretty good company!

A fourth purpose of the Church is to Baptize people into the Fellowship, into the Community of Faith. We are part of one family, the Body of Christ. We are here for each other! We are here with each other! We are here to hold each other up! Here to fall into each other's arms when can't go on alone! It's the image of a Cord of three strands. Together, we are not so easily broken! Start braiding!

The fifth Purpose of the Church is to teach the ways of Jesus, to teach ourselves and others to "obey" His ways! Theologians call this Discipleship. We have a responsibility to transform ourselves into the image of Jesus Christ, growing and maturing daily in our faith! We are called to be on a journey that constantly draws us closer to God!

Here is one place where a sense of “duty” does come into play! We have all been saved by the Grace of God! It is not about “Works Righteousness”! The question is, how will we respond to that Gracious Gift? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Pastor and Theologian imprisoned in Nazi Germany, warns about Cheap Grace! Cheap Grace, is Grace that is received, accepted, but then, never acted upon! How should we respond to what we have been given?

Put out into Deep Water, says our Lord! That can be a scary thing! Especially, if you don’t know how to swim! But wade out anyway, says Jesus! Get good and wet! Don’t drown! But make sure that you don’t just stop at ankle-deep! “Trust me,” says Jesus! “I will keep you safe!” “Throw out your nets, far and wide, close to your boat even! And just watch how I will fill them up!” And all of God’s people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Almighty God, we have walked in your world, through another week. We have heard your Call, and seen your Presence, and responding as we are able. Help us to rejoice, in you, where we have done this well! And to make corrections, where we might have stumbled and fell. And fill us now, with your Holy Spirit, so that we might walk through this next week, even closer to your voice. Touch our hearts Lord, this morning, so that we might sense your Presence and follow wherever you lead. Still our minds Lord, as we praise and worship you today, so that we might indeed love you with all of our hearts, with all of our souls, and with all of our minds. And please, Father, help us to love each of those around us, in life-giving, selfless ways, so that we will witness to you!

We come now, Lord, into the Fellowship of Believers, into this Family, into this Church, in order to worship you, and praise your Holy name. We come to gain strength, from being in your Presence, and wisdom, by studying your Holy Word. We come to lift each other up, and to receive support for ourselves. We come with burdens, Lord, and with joys. And we lift each of these before your Holy Altar of Grace. We place before you..... We ask for your Grace to be poured out on their hearts, and for your Peace to fill each corner of their lives. We ask for your guidance in all of the challenges that come before them, and your healing touch on broken bodies and troubled minds. We ask for strength Lord, and courage—for peace and the ability to be still—and for the wisdom and discernment to know what is needed, and when. And we ask these things in Jesus' Name, lifting before you the very prayer that He taught us saying, "Our Father..."