

Sermon – Epiphany 5 – St Luke and St Matthew, Brooklyn

Luke 5:1-11

“Here am I, Lord.” “Here am I, Lord.” I can’t tell you how many times I have said these words during the unfolding of my journey from Australia to Brooklyn. “Here am I, Lord; send me.” It wasn’t always so. I spent many years saying ‘well I’m here but don’t send me, I’m not ready.’

When I started attending the Church of St John the Evangelist, in Darlinghurst, an inner-Sydney village, I was introduced to the song “Here I am Lord, it is I Lord, I have heard you calling in the night. I will go Lord, where you need me, I will hold your people in my heart.” Every time it was sung I would tear up. There was something powerful in those words, and in the act of surrender that the words invite.

The reading you heard earlier from Isaiah 6 reminds us of the origin of these words. Isaiah’s vision of God’s calling of him to prophetic ministry sets the scene for how God calls us to ministry too. Visions and dreams are a favorite tool of the Lord to connect with us. In his vision, Isaiah found himself standing before the Lord in the temple’s most holy place, the place where God was thought to dwell.

When the holy seraphs chanted in unison, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth in full of his glory,” Isaiah suddenly realized that he was not pure enough to be in the presence of the holy one, the Lord of hosts. The vision of God’s holiness, the *mysterium tremendum*, the awe inspiring mystery, causes Isaiah to immediately humble himself before God declaring that he is lost and a man of unclean lips. His humility brings on the compassion of the Lord who purifies him when the seraph lifts a burning hot coal from the fire and touches his lips. This action absolves Isaiah from sin.

Through the grace of the Lord of hosts, Isaiah is readied to answer the call that is to be made of him. He heard a voice calling for someone to be sent, someone to go for the Lord to the people with unclean lips. Isaiah answers the call. “Here am I; send me!” In answering the call Isaiah didn’t know what he was getting himself in for in the same way that we don’t know what will happen when we answer the call of God, and surrender ourselves to God’s need.

The call that God makes of us is a profound moment in our lives. We are commissioned by the Holy Spirit in baptism however this type of call and surrender happens after we have developed the depth of faith and maturity in Jesus Christ to be able to answer honestly. It is one of those threshold moments in our faith journey that resonates with us when it happens and possibly fills us with fear as to what might transpire.

In Paul’s epistle to the Corinthians we hear him tell the story of his similar experience in crossing that threshold to answer the call of God to prophetic ministry. Called last as an apostle, Paul acknowledged his sin of persecuting the church of God. However, his submission and surrender to God’s call, became possible because of the grace of God. Paul was who he was and

God used his gifts and his experience of call to minister to the gentiles and the early regional churches.

Simon Peter had a similar humbling experience when Jesus filled the fisherman's nets despite the apparent lack of fish. When he witnessed the abundance of fish brought in by the Lord's doing, he fell on his knees and acknowledged before Jesus his sin of unbelief.

Jesus filled both Paul and Peter with grace so that their feelings of inadequacy and sinfulness were absolved. God is not perturbed by our inherent sense of inadequacy and sinfulness. It doesn't matter to God because God stands always ready to shower us with God's grace and forgiveness. However, God's grace really does matter to us. It negates our sins and allows God to call us into ministry, to use the gifts God has taught and instilled in us for the advancement of God's kingdom. Soon we will sing Amazing Grace and be reminded of the power of God's grace to sustain us in our lives.

Part of God's call and our response is our humble surrender to God. As part of our surrender we acknowledge before God our sins, our weaknesses, our shadow side actions and those things that we have buried deep inside of us that might be eating away at our souls. When we acknowledge these, our surrender is complete and we can say, "here am I Lord; send me."

This month we celebrate Black History Month. The precursor was created in 1926 by historian Carter G Woodson. The celebration was originally for the week that spanned the birth dates of Abraham Lincoln on February 12 and Frederick Douglas on February 14. The primary purpose of the week was to encourage the coordinated teaching of the history of American blacks in the nation's public schools.

Woodson believed that the understanding of one's history helped ensure the physical and intellectual survival of one's race within a broader society. When a society suppresses history, especially history of the abuse and suppression of minorities, it does so to benefit the majority, as if wiping historic events from the record will somehow wipe them from memory. What happens to societies that try to do this is the same that happens to men and women that try to do the same thing in their personal lives. Societal sins are the same as our own sins. There comes a time of reckoning.

We are seeing in Virginia this past week a time of reckoning, where the state's three senior political leaders are having to confront their own past sins. They will never shake free their actions without a full surrender to what they have done, seeking forgiveness from those they have hurt and allowing the grace of God to work in them toward healing and corrective action.

My own experience of black history is from my home country where the Australian aboriginal peoples were similarly suppressed and discriminated against and subject to genocide by the early white settlers. In the first half of the 20th c the government, supported by the churches, removed many mixed-blood, or 'half-caste' children from families and institutionalized them, to 'help' them fit into a mainly European immigrant society. This was enslavement although it

wasn't called slavery. Children were forbidden from speaking their native language, were made to wear western style cloths and were prevented from socializing in aboriginal cultures.

The effects of the institutionalization of this generation of children was immense. Not only did they seek to rewrite their history but they failed to record the origins of many of the children thus preventing reunification with families when they reached adulthood. A major political and social debate occurred in Australia in the late 1990s and early 2000s about the need for the country to repent of these actions and to make amends for the destruction of so many people's lives. In 2008, the government finally made a formal apology but offered no reparations.

Australia does not have a Black History Month but it should. It is right and proper that a country reflect on the treatment of the peoples subjected to suppression and alienation in their society. Australian aboriginals are a culture regarded as the oldest continuing culture in the world and their rich history has much to teach us all. Similarly, the history of black America has much to teach us too especially about resiliency and faith that something better lies beyond the pain of racism, suppression and slavery.

Frederick Douglass, one of the two reasons we celebrate this month, saw his life as prophetic and in the mold of the prophet Jeremiah according to David Blight, the author of *Frederick Douglass Prophet of Freedom*, a wonderful new book. Blight said Douglass had a "radical hope in the theory of natural rights and the view that history was humankind's grand story, punctuated by terrible ruptures followed by potential regeneration."¹ Douglass saw that Jeremiah and Isaiah provided the language that could ground the experience of an enslaved people and offer them hope of future freedom.

Douglass was a prophet in the way he answered the call of God and said, "here am I; send me." He rose from slavery to freedom through his sheer will and God's grace. Of all his speeches, his Fourth of July speech from 1852, resonates most powerfully today. His thrust was that the ideals of the Declaration of Independence were not being experienced by black Americans and he systematically laid out the contradictions of society and called for the hypocrisy of the nation to be exposed.

Isaiah, Simon Peter, Paul, Frederick and countless others have answered God's call of "who shall I send." They each answered in a way, "here am I; send me." Their call came amidst the acknowledgement of their own sinfulness, their surrender to God and their blessing with God's grace. Justice and full equality have not yet been achieved and the full regeneration of God's people is not yet complete.

God needs prophets and will call prophets continually to be the voice of justice, love and mercy in the wilderness. Is God calling you, and will you say, "here am I; send me"?

Amen

¹ Blight, David *Frederick Douglass, Prophet of Freedom*, Simon and Schuster, New York NY, 2018, p236