

A Sermon by the Reverend Elizabeth F. Keeler  
The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany (C)  
Sunday, February 10, 2019

*Isaiah 6:1-8 | Psalm 138*  
*1 Corinthians 15:1-11 | Luke 5:1-11*

It can be both wonderful opportunity and yet, at the same time, hugely intimidating to preach on a Sunday when all of our readings present a crystal-clear consistent message. Today we are offered the theme of call, God's call speaking to us through each passage, sentence, word, and syllable of Holy Scripture. Notice we hear about call in Isaiah's exquisite passage that is often read at ordinations and ends with the prophet boldly proclaiming: "Send me." We hear about call from Paul, who does not count himself worthy of call, yet bravely works harder than others, and by the Grace of God proclaims the Good News. And in our Gospel story we hear Jesus calling Simon Peter and the other fisherman not to be afraid but to follow him and become fishers of men.

And so today Jesus calls to us: "Follow me."

This call to follow, to be sent and go into the world as Christians, is a beautiful but terrifying one and I would suggest you don't believe anyone who says it's not. But let's begin by acknowledging that the call to follow is as relevant for us today as it was when Jesus stepped out of the boat on to the shores of Galilee. Furthermore, this command, God's call to follow with its simplicity and precision, has a way of cutting through the two thousand years of theology built up around it. The call to follow is refreshingly clear and is the root of all we are about as Christians. The call to go out as disciples, following in Jesus' footsteps, crosses denominational and ecclesiastical lines. And the call to follow does not bow to rank or privilege and it is both loud and deep enough to guide any person, or any church, through rough seas or ambiguous times.

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Now there are several strategies we might use to think about at call. Today I'd like to focus on two basic ones. First, let's appreciate that someone who says: "follow me" is going somewhere – and to be perfectly honest we need direction. Any and all Christians living in our post-modern secular age need clear unambiguous direction. Our lives and choices are far too complicated to be without strong, defined leadership and we get that from Jesus. So even while Jesus's words "follow me" may seem intimidating, perhaps even intrusive, part of their appeal lies in the fact that they promise to connect us with one who is going somewhere. Several years ago a bumper sticker began appearing on cars that read: "Don't follow me, I'm lost." There is absolutely no appeal in that slogan for me. Jesus offers the opposite of that. He has a plan, work to do, a purpose to achieve in history and beyond, a way of life that offers forgiveness and hope, wholeness and love – and he deigns to cut us in on that experience.

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Secondly, we can surmise that anyone who says: "Follow me" is obviously more interested in the future than in the past. This, too, is good news for us who are tasked with following God's call. With Jesus it's not so much where we've been that matters, but where we're going. Not whether we've fallen (we all

have) but whether we'll get up. With Jesus it's less about whom we've hurt in the past, and more about whom we'll help in the future. The reality of our limitations is no secret nor even of that much interest to God. God knows how fallible we are but calls us into a future of service and cooperation nonetheless. Remember, God doesn't really need us to accomplish God's purposes, of course not. But God does long for us to participate in God's good work. And the work we have to do is ever before us and will not be accomplished by looking backwards or living in the past. Any casual perusal of the Gospel reveals how little time Jesus spent allowing people to be burdened by their past. He healed and forgave and lifted up for one simple reason – to allow and enable all those who have ears to hear to listen to respond to his call.

And Jesus calls to us: "Follow me."

In conclusion I'd ask us to consider what gets in the way of our hearing clearly God's call. What makes it difficult for you, for me, to accept and respond to Jesus's call to follow? Of course we realize that it's never been easy for anyone to follow, never really smooth sailing accepting that clarion call.

Remember, Paul describes himself as unfit to be called an Apostle – after all he spent the first part of his career persecuting the followers of Jesus. For Simon Peter it was a sense of sin: "Go away from me Lord for I am a sinful man" was his initial response. And I do believe it is this sense of unworthiness that often gets in the way of our hearing and responding to God's call. I'll admit I find myself overly attentive to the disparity between myself and the one I am called to follow. Are we all just too aware and self-conscious of our inadequacies and deficits? Too fixated on our own trials and tribulations and weaknesses and sins to be concerned with call?

And yet still, Jesus calls to us: "Follow me."

Friends, the only way we can possibly go out into the world as Christians, as followers of Christ, is by realizing first that the message we bring is not about us or our inadequacies, rather it is about God. The work we are about is God's work and, as such, it is full of grace and love and hope and triumph. We actually don't need to count ourselves worthy to be in God's service. Our going forth is only possible because we are called and sent by the one who overcame all doubts and fears, who conquered death and the grave. I've said it many times from this pulpit but I believe we need to be reminded many times: *It's not about us – it's about God.* And God can do miraculous things working within us. God always has and God always will, we just need to whisper yes. The call has never changed; there've been no edits, no revisions, no amendments.

And so Jesus calls to us today and every day: "Follow me." Amen.