

The Rev. Luke Selles
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“Do not be afraid. From now on you will be catching people.” In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Black theologian, educator, and Civil Rights activist Howard Thurman opens his book *Jesus and the Disinherited* with a story about an encounter with a Hindu who asks him directly, “Why are you a Christian when your nation, which calls itself a Christian nation, justified the enslavement of your people with Christianity and continues to oppress while claiming Christ?”

Throughout the book, Thurman attempts to answer that question. And he believes that Christians, in understanding Jesus as the liberator of the oppressed, must start with a recognition of Jesus’ Jewishness. We must understand his ministry in the context of Israel’s relationship with God as well as his own ethnic identity and social class.

I want to look today at the two call stories in our scriptures: the first in the Old Testament lesson as we see the call of Isaiah in the Temple, and then the call of Peter and the other disciples who would follow him to the end of his ministry and beyond to establish the Church.

From the very beginning of our Old Testament passage, we’re placed in a political climate. The first line reads, “In the year King Uzziah died.” Now at that time the people of Israel were separated into two kingdoms: there was the kingdom of Judah, which King Uzziah ruled, and there was the Northern Kingdom. Now at that time there were many competing empires and powers that were much greater than Judah or the Northern Kingdom, and Uzziah, in order to navigate this fear and anxiety of these

pressing empires, did not return to God, did not establish the reforms that Isaiah and other prophets before him had called on him to do. Instead of returning to the teachings of the Torah, to welcoming the stranger in their midst, to feeding the hungry, and to clothing the naked, King Uzziah moved to warfare, and he moved to political alliances with the strongest empire at the time, Assyria.

And Isaiah warned him that this would not work out well in the end. But King Uzziah got some immediate success, and so for his new master, he gutted the temple in Jerusalem and established relics and idols of the Assyrian gods.

This is the context of Isaiah's call. Isaiah has a vision in the Temple, he encounters God in all of God's holiness, and what's striking is that God immediately Isaiah right up front that this is going to be futile. That his prophecy, his work, is going to be futile. Isaiah cries out, "How long, O Lord?" How long will my people make a covenant with death? And God replies that there will be a physical and spiritual exile.

At the very end of our passage we see references to an oak tree being cut down. Now this was a reference to the Assyrian gods, which were worshipped as wooden poles. But then we see something interesting, we see a stump. "The holy seed is the stump." Now in chapter 11 of Isaiah, Isaiah picks up this theme again of the "stump," he calls it "the stump of Jesse." Now the stump of Jesse is an allusion to the Davidic line, the anointed line of kings that had been established by God in David and reigned until it had been broken before the time of Isaiah. So was a return of a divinely established kingship, and anointed one, a Messiah.

We as Christians believe that Jesus is that king, that Messiah. So turning now to our Gospel lesson, we see this Messiah: Jesus was poor. He was a humble carpenter. And he was a Jew living under Roman occupation. While Isaiah prophesied the remnant returning, and we see the return of the Jews to the land, but they are still not free. John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, the one who baptised him in the Jordan River, has been

executed for just talking about a spiritual and physical kingdom that was perceived as challenging Caesar's authority.

Yet, in this context, we don't see Jesus wrestling with the politicians, we don't see Jesus lashing out at the Roman legions. Jesus' ministry is elsewhere. We see Jesus in the chapter leading up to our passage healing the sick. And in our passage we see him preaching to the poor. And it is in this context he calls Simon Peter, whose mother-in-law he heals in the previous chapter, and James and John, Simon Peter's colleagues.

And we see them do a miracle. Jesus tells them, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." And they say, "Jesus, we're fishermen. We know this, we've been doing this all night. Nothing's going to come up." But Peter says, "Master...if you say so, I will let down the nets." And so that act of obedience, that faith is rewarded and rewarded incredibly: the boats are described as sinking under the weight of the fish. And Simon Peter, recognizing the miraculous nature of what has happened, protests to Jesus his insufficiencies, his smallness, his unworthiness of being even part of this miracle. But Jesus calls him anyway. And he says to him and to James and to John and to us: "Do not be afraid. For now you will be catching people."

Our call is the same. The people of God have never looked to the empires of Assyria or Rome for moral or spiritual leadership. Because that's not where the kingdom of God is being built. St. Martin's, the kingdom of God is being built in our hearts, in our acts of faith and obedience, in our recognition of God's overwhelming grace in our lives, that heals. And so looking to Jesus, to his power over death on the cross, trusting in his strength and working for his glory, we also are to catch people, to catch people into life. Amen.