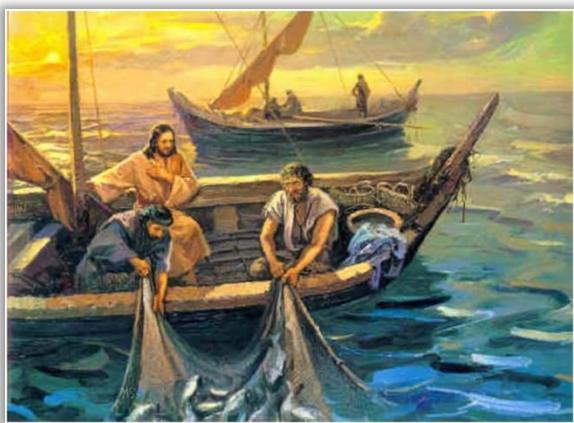


## Homily for Sunday, Feb. 6, 2022 – Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time



The readings are a little bit on the long side this weekend, so I don't expect you to remember, in detail, what you heard in that first reading. Suffice it to say, all three readings are about God calling someone, all three readings are about someone feeling unworthy or unqualified to answer the Lord's call, and all three readings are about people overcoming their reluctance and responding to God in a positive way, a life-changing way.

Let's go back to the opening line of the first reading where Isaiah writes this: "***In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne...***" This is the year 742 B.C., and the king, Uzziah, who has been reigning as king of Judah for 52 years, has just died. The life expectancy in Biblical times was about 40 years, so for most of the people, this king who reigned for 52 years, was the only king they ever knew. Uzziah became their king at age 16, and was very well liked and very well respected. With his death it wasn't just a king who died, it was our one-and-only-beloved-king. The people, including Isaiah, were devastated. Who would continue all the good work that King Uzziah was about, now that he was dead?

Isaiah, mourning the king's death, is praying in the temple when he has a vision of God. It is more than a vision. It is a heavenly sound-and-light show complete with the Lord sitting on a throne, surrounded by angels singing about the holiness of God's glory. This celestial vision was blowing Isaiah away. He was awe-struck. My call to the priesthood was a little more subdued than Isaiah's call.

Speaking about being awe-struck, whenever I stand in front of something or someone who is awe-inspiring, I kind of feel humbled, unimportant, and totally incompetent. I think inwardly, "Why did they get so much talent, and why did I get so little?" I remember about 20 years ago being at a Christmas concert in a huge music hall in Toronto where the orchestra played only original compositions and not the classic Christmas carols I grew up with and loved. I went reluctantly, but I enjoyed the entire evening. I sat next to a nine-year-old boy, who wanted to clap

before the end of one of the pieces, but his father prevented him from doing so by forcing the boy to sit on his hands. I didn't understand what was going on until the last note was played. At that point, like Pavlov's dog, the father nodded to the boy, and the boy sprang up from his seat clapping to his heart's content. Both the father and the boy were beaming with pride. The boy turned to me and said, "That's my song!" The father told me his son had composed the entire piece.

Imagine, not only playing but composing complex classical music by the time you are nine years old. I felt humbled, incompetent and downright stupid sitting next to the kid. I didn't dare tell him that I had mastered learning how to tie my shoes by the time I was 12 years old!

Isaiah in the temple, like me in the concert hall, felt overwhelmed by the vision of God sitting upon a throne surrounded by angels. Because of the king's death, the torch has to be passed on, but Isaiah doesn't feel worthy to reach out for it. And the reason he gives is that he has a foul mouth. He tries to wiggle out of this calling by saying to God, "You don't want me. I curse. I swear. ***I am a man of unclean lips.*** My mother tried to wash my mouth out with soap, but it didn't work. Pick somebody else, somebody more worthy." God looks over to one of the angels and says, "I see we're out of soap...again. Angel, make yourself useful and hand me that hot poker." God cleanses Isaiah's tongue with a burning piece of coal. There are now no more excuses for not being God's prophet, no more excuses for not speaking God's life-giving words to others.

Then Isaiah, in the same vision, actually hears God say, "***Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?***" Isaiah, maybe fearing the hot poker will come out again, said, "***Here I am; send me!***" I actually don't think he volunteered out of a place of fear. In fact, when he said, "Pick me," it was a sure sign that he had overcome his fear. With the Lord on his side, and with the Lord on our side, there is nothing to be feared.

St. Paul, in that second reading, tells the Corinthians about his own reluctance in following the Lord Jesus, after all Paul knew, more than anybody else, that he was a cruel persecutor of the followers of Jesus. Yet God called him. Paul probably rationalized in his mind, "Why would God call someone who persecuted Christians to be a promoter of Christ's message to the world? After all, who's going to believe me?" Like Isaiah, 700 years prior, Paul felt overwhelmed, unworthy, and totally

inadequate. Yet, he says in that reading, "***But by the grace of God I am what I am.***" In other words, God chose me not only *in spite* of my sins, my faults, my flaws but *with* my sins, my faults, and my flaws. "I am what I am" and it is this flawed person that God wants. Now, like Isaiah, Paul also had an awakening, a conversion, a manifestation of God that seemed to turn his life around. We are told that Paul, in the midst of rounding up Christians to persecute them, was knocked to the ground by a blinding flash of light. From the light, Jesus said, "Paul, why are you persecuting me" (Acts 9:4). He realized, like Isaiah, that he was in the presence of and being addressed by the Holy One, God. And again, like Isaiah, Paul felt he didn't deserve this calling. He said, "***I am the least of the Apostles. In fact, I should even be called an Apostle because I persecuted the Church of God.***" Nevertheless, Paul said "yes" to God's calling. Leaving aside all excuses of inadequacy, Paul gives his life promoting the Kingdom of God.

Lastly, that same theme of call, of feeling undeserving, and of responding despite it all, is also in the gospel. A manifestation of God's power is also at play in this story. It is not an obvious and powerful vision of heaven with God sitting on a throne surrounded by angels. It is not an obvious and powerful flash of light from heaven that knocks you down. It is more subtle than that. It is simply the calm voice of Jesus speaking to a simple fisherman, "***Put your net out into the deep water.***" The fisherman has worked all night and has nothing to show for his efforts, but he does so at the Stranger's command. He senses, in the same way Isaiah and Paul sensed, that he was in the presence of someone and something more. When the nets returned full of fish, Peter felt his inadequacy in the presence of God. He says, "***Go away from me, for I am a sinful man.***" It's almost the same words of Isaiah: "Go away from me, for I am a man of unclean lips. And it's almost the same words of Paul: "Go away from me, for I persecuted the Church."

The good news is that Jesus has no intention of ever going away from you or me. He stays and keeps repeating the words, "***Do not be afraid.***" He stays until we have the courage to accept what God has always accepted—our talents and our lack of talent, our virtues and our vices, our generosity and our pettiness, our joys and our misery, our strengths and our faults, our piety and our sinfulness. It's the whole package he wants, it's the whole package he values, and it is the whole package he needs if the Kingdom is to go forward. God doesn't choose the qualified but qualifies those whom he chooses.

***Fr. Phil***