

Yr. C, Epiphany 5
February 7, 2010
Preached by Furman Buchanan
St. Martins in the Fields
1397 words

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

The intercom in our 10th grade geometry class crackled to life, our teacher paused at the front of the room, and we all looked up from our notebooks at the old speaker box mounted over the chalk board. “Furman Lee Buchanan—I need to see you in my office.” It was the last period of the school day when I was called...to the principal’s office.

It is both intimidating and embarrassing to get a sudden, unexpected call to the principal’s office in the middle of class, especially when your friends tease you with repeated exclamations of “uh oh” and “good luck!”

I can imagine the prophet, Isaiah’s friends having a ‘field day’ with the intimidating and embarrassing description of his call involving bizarre, six-winged creatures flying around like those scary monkeys in the Wizard of Oz movie, but hurling hot, live coals. I don’t know the Hebrew word for ‘delusional’ but we can easily picture Isaiah’s friends teasing him about his “overactive imagination.”

Getting called can often be frightening as well as embarrassing. Is it just my imagination? Did the principal *really* call me to his office? Is there a way I can simply ignore this dream so it will go away? What will I say to my family and friends to help them understand?

What is the most intimidating or embarrassing call you have received? Have you perhaps felt called to speak a difficult and honest word to someone? Have you been called to an unpopular or risky decision that was simply the right thing to do? Are you being called beyond your comfort zone of predictable thoughts or comfortable routines?

The call of God comes not only to prophets, apostles and priests. The call of God comes to all of God’s people, and it can be intimidating and embarrassing, can’t it? Like Isaiah, we say, “Woe is me! Why is this happening to me?”

Mr. Reed Swann was the principal at Barnwell High School. He seemed nice and friendly, but I imagined his tolerance to be fairly low for the kind of foolishness that high school students are prone to get into. He met me as I approached the door to his office, and gestured for me to sit in the chair across from his cluttered desk. “Furman Lee—I’ll get right to the point. You need to be on the debate team we’re going to start up for next year.”

I immediately felt both the relief of discovering that I was not in some sort of trouble and the resistance of discovering that I was nonetheless being put on the spot. “Mr. Swann,” I replied, “It sounds like a good thing, but I just don’t have time to do one more thing, right now. I’ve got to keep my grades up. My classes are harder this year than they were last year. I’m already doing a lot of extracurricular activities. And besides, I’m already a sophomore. A freshman could have four years to contribute. I’m sorry, but I just cannot do it.”

He looked at me quietly for a moment, until a satisfied smile came across his lips, as he responded, “Furman Lee, you just gave me five good arguments in response to one simple suggestion. Can’t you see why you need to be on the debate team?” He had won, and we both knew it; although it still took me a few days to commit to this new idea.

Does this sound familiar? It should—because it sounds like the way many of us respond to the calls that come our way. Last week, we heard the prophet, Jeremiah’s call, and he answered, “But Lord, I’m only a boy. (In other words, I’m too young.) And this morning, we heard the prophet Isaiah’s call, and he answered, “But Lord, I am a man of unclean lips (In other words—How can a foul-mouthed rascal like me possibly be the voice for a pure and righteous God like you?)”

Or what about this morning’s lesson from St. Paul, who remembers that he was unfit to be an apostle, having committed assault and battery with intent to kill the very first apostles of Jesus. Or St. Peter in today’s Gospel lesson, who is called out into the deep water to let down his nets for a catch. Peter sounds like many congregations sound when they hear this call, answering skeptically, “We’ve already tried that once, and it didn’t work!”

Getting called is often like being put on the spot, and we don't like that very much.

There are many good reasons to reject the various calls that come our way, and frankly, we should not say yes to *every* call we receive. But how are we to know when to say yes or when to say no? How can we know for sure if we *really are* too young...or too old...or just unfit for the job?

Do you have some good and reliable excuses that you like to use? The Bible is just full of them, you know. In fact, I think the only thing that shows up in the Bible more often than God's call are the excuses that God's people throw back when they feel like they are being put on the spot.

The call of God comes not only to prophets, apostles and priests. The call of God comes to all of God's people, and it puts us on the spot, doesn't it? Like St. Paul and St. Peter, we know that we are not worthy. And so we resist, we make excuses, and we refuse to commit.

You're right, you know. You are not worthy to be called, *just like the rest of us*. But know this—God has shown over and over again that the Holy Spirit calls us anyway. God says, "I want *you*—with all of your skills and with all of your faults. I want *you*—with all of your faith and with all of your doubts and fears —I'll take you just the way you are."

Getting called to the principal's office changed my life. Even though I did not see myself as a public speaker at that time, someone else *did* and he cared enough to help me discover and accept that call. I had the great privilege of studying under one of the most dynamic and gifted debate coaches in the nation.

I can see clearly now—in ways I could have never seen then—how responding to *that* call in 1981 would help me respond to *this* call in 2010. I'm still intimidated and embarrassed at times. I still feel like I'm being put on the spot at times. I live with the knowledge that I'm still not worthy. And yes, I still have doubts and make excuses. Yet, I am convinced that God calls us in spite of ourselves—with all of our skills and all of our faults, with all of our faith and all of our doubts and fears.

And I am even more convinced that the call of God comes not only to prophets, apostles and priests. The call of God comes to all of God's people. Every one of us is called—always and everywhere to give thanks¹ and praise to God as recipients of a Divine Blessing.

Moreover, every one of us is called to share that Divine Blessing with others—especially the poor, the sick, and those in any need or trouble. Every one of us is called to listen carefully to the voices of people who are trying to call out the best in us. And, every one of us is called to help others discover their gifts, and invite them to use those gifts to the glory of God and for the benefit of other people.

It is Christ who is calling you to take a chance...to put out into the deep water. Just consider me to be *your* principal. I'm the one putting you on the spot. And although I'm willing to listen to a few good excuses, don't be surprised if I just smile and remind you that you need to be on the team anyway. So I'll get right to the point. You have incredible gifts of all kinds. Open 'em up. Open *your* gifts, for Christ's sake, work with them and share them generously to Christ's honor and glory.

Amen.

¹ These words are drawn from the Eucharistic Prayer following the Sursum Corda in prayers A & B, *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 361, 367.

