

Yr. C, Epiphany 5
February 6, 2022
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1560 Words

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

Excuses, excuses!

They are among the most powerfully debilitating forces in the universe. And the Bible is filled with them—from the very beginning. “The woman made me do it,” said Adam, so unconvincingly. “The serpent tricked me,” Eve added, for good measure.

It’s as if we don’t know how to approach God any other way. We feel like we need to give an account for what we’ve done.

“Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid...would you please check out this long list of excuses I have so carefully prepared for you today?”

That’s not how we pray! We pray that our Almighty God will cleanse the thoughts of our hearts, including our excuses, so that we may perfectly love, and worthily magnify the LORD’s holy Name.

The only thing more powerful than our excuses for what we have done...is the power of our excuses for rejecting what God is asking us to do.

In the year that King Uzziah died...you know, the year when all the stability in Judah seemed to be unraveling, that was the untimely year when Isaiah saw the LORD God. It was terrifying. Isaiah encountered the holy, holy, holy Lord; our God of power and might, whose glory fills heaven and earth!

But still, there were all those creepy, six-winged Seraphs whirling above. There were the thundering voices, so loud that the pivots on the thresholds were quaking. And there was smoke everywhere. It was a full, frontal assault on the senses, so, of course, Isaiah leads off with...an excuse!

“Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among people with unclean lips...” In other words, I *know* I’m not worthy to be here.

Thank God that guilt is *not* a valid excuse in the eyes of the LORD, or we would not have the powerful prophesies of Isaiah.

Without Isaiah, we—and Israel—would not have been challenged to remain faithful, the way we need to be challenged. Without Isaiah, we—and Israel—would not have been comforted to remain hopeful, in the ways we need to be comforted.

“It is too light a thing,” Isaiah speaks on behalf of God. “It is too light a thing that you should just be my servant...Rather, I will give you as a light *to the whole world!*”¹ Do you hear that challenge coming from what *used to be* unclean lips?

“I will comfort you like a mother,” Isaiah also speaks on behalf of God. “You shall nurse and be carried...and dandled on her knees.”² Do you hear that irresistible comfort coming from what *used to be* unclean lips?

¹ Isaiah 49:6

² Isaiah 66:12-13

If guilt were a reasonable excuse in God’s eyes, we would not have these sixty-six chapters, packed full of truth and beauty, and overflowing with challenge and comfort.

Near the end of his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul preaches the Good News of Jesus Christ, and then admits the very thing he *could have used* on the road to Damascus, as the absolute, best excuse for *not* becoming an apostle. “I am unfit to be called an apostle,” Paul writes, “because I (violently) persecuted the Church.”

Imagine that! Violence and murder of faithful Christians is *not* a valid excuse in the eyes of the LORD. I’m not willing to go that far, but apparently God is. Otherwise, we would *not have* the preaching of St. Paul. Without Paul, we, the Church, would not have the power of God’s forgiveness and love so beautifully, poetically described.

“Love is patient; love is kind;” Paul wrote, with a *blood-stained hand*,

“Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude...it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”³

Paul wrote with authority—as someone who received the unconditional love of God, and then *shared it* with the whole world.

Then, there was the time when Jesus was standing beside a lake, and the crowd was pressing in on him. He began by asking a simple fisherman for a small favor. (*That’s the way you do it—start small!*) “Could you take us out *just a little way* from the shore?” Jesus asked.

Well, that was easy enough! You know, we are a lot like Simon. We can sometimes handle the small requests without excuses.

But *then*...Jesus starts messing with Simon a little bit. You know what I’m talking about! “It’s time *now* to put out in the deep water,” Jesus says, “and let down your nets.”

And there it is—the *excuse*—spilling so effortlessly from Simon’s lips. “But Lord, we worked all night long out here and caught nothing!”

(PAUSE....) “Alright, alright—if you say so.”

Thank God that our previous failures are *not* a valid excuse in the eyes of the LORD, or Simon, James and John would not have been called to trust Jesus more than they trusted their own, personal, professional experience.

Suddenly, this becomes one of the funniest stories in the Gospel. Nets are breaking. Fish are jumping. Boats are sinking. And three fishermen—*no doubt in my mind*—are cursing loudly...while Jesus is listening, and a giant crowd is watching.

“Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” There’s *Isaiah’s excuse* being recycled by Simon all over again. We just can’t help it.

³ 1st Corinthians 13

“Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid...you know that I am not up for this today...So cleanse the thoughts—and *the excuses*—of my heart so that I may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy Name.”

Listen, the biggest miracle in today’s Gospel story is *not* the exceptional catch of fish, as impressive as that is. The biggest miracle in this story is when three ordinary fishermen came ashore, put down their nets, walked away from their boats, left their families and friends, and their means of survival, and without uttering so much as a single excuse—they followed Jesus. Period.

It’s a *miracle!* All the best excuses in the world were never spoken by those guys.

“But Lord, I have a job. I have responsibilities to my family.”

“Lord, it took me years to afford this boat. I can’t walk away from that.”

“Lord, I’m too old for this much change. Don’t get me wrong—I’m thankful. This is amazing. You’re wonderful. I’m willing to praise you every single week right here...but I can’t follow you... It’s...It’s just not a good time for me right now.”

Many years ago, someone asked me to join an EFM group at St. Martin’s. They made a huge mistake when they told me it was a 4-year program. That didn’t sound like a ‘small ask’ to me, and so I said, “No thank you. I have a busy job. I have young kids. Blah, blah, blah, blah.” Excuses. Excuses.

The joke was on me. Several years later, we left our old lives behind to go to seminary so I could prepare for a lifetime of ordained ministry. And every single day, my path to the seminary classrooms cut right through the home office of Education for Ministry—EFM.

I got to laugh at myself, thinking back to that earlier call I turned down. Hmmm. Let’s see. A meeting just once a week...only during the school year...with a wonderful small group of faithful friends and no exams. In hindsight, it didn’t sound like such a ‘big ask’ after all.

But this is not a sermon about EFM...or about me. This is a sermon about excuses—*your excuses*.

So, what, dear people, is your ‘deep water?’ What ‘deep water’ are you hesitant to push out into?

What gives you pause when it comes to actually *following* Jesus? What causes *your excuses* well up inside, and spill out from your lips? Which tasks make *you* feel *unworthy*? Which personal—maybe even *professional* experiences—lead you to say, “Lord, we already failed at that. It’s not going to work.”?

This is the Sunday when I need to ask you: What is it that you are afraid of doing for the glory of God? What are you too busy or too young or too old or too tired *to try*...for the glory of God?

All the prophets, the apostles, the preachers and teachers, all the martyrs and saints of every generation have shown us the truth. And the truth is this. *None of us* are worthy of the call of God. *All of us* have excuses. And in God’s eyes, *none of those excuses* are valid.

Hearing the invitation to follow Jesus’ way of love is *one thing*. *Acting on it* is quite another. Responding to Christ is what turns the Divine Spark into a flame.

And *that is why* we must pray this prayer, not only in thought and with words, but also in deed:

“Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid. Cleanse the thoughts—*and all the excuses*—of our hearts so that we may *perfectly* love you and *worthily* magnify your holy Name, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Amen.