

The Rev. Canon Allison St. Louis
Year C, 5 Epiphany
Isa. 6:1-8; Lk.5:1-11
February 7, 2010
Christ Church Cathedral

SIGNS OF GOD'S REIGN

A little over five years ago, I moved to an unfamiliar neighborhood in an unfamiliar state and began serving in an unfamiliar church in an unfamiliar diocese. A few months earlier, I, like Peter, had been going about my daily routine, when God's call came. Actually, the call came through Dean Pendleton – a call to “come and see” – “come and see” what God was doing in and through God's people at Christ Church Cathedral.

It wasn't the first - or the last - time God invited someone to “come and see.” Recall the stories we just heard about God's invitation first to Isaiah and then to Peter. Notice that, as they are going about their daily lives – Isaiah in the temple and Peter at his job – God gets their attention – through Isaiah's spellbinding vision and through Peter's mindboggling catch of fish. When each becomes aware of being in the presence of the Holy, he recoils – not because of what he perceives on the outside, but because of what is exposed on the inside. Notice, however, that neither Isaiah's unclean lips nor Peter's sinfulness leads God to dismiss them from God's presence. Instead, Isaiah is invited to become a prophet, and Peter is invited to become a disciple. God's invitation to them – and to us - can be good news to those who fear that they are not good enough to serve God. On the other hand, it can be bad news for those who use their unworthiness as a crutch that keeps them from serving God.

Both Isaiah and Peter seem to grasp that it really is not about them or their unworthiness – it's about God and God's dream for creation. So, when God invites them to become part of the new thing that God is doing, neither one uses his human frailties as an excuse for bowing out, neither one asks for details so they could make a more informed decision, and neither one says “thank you, but no thank you.” They take their places and do their part in realizing God's dream for a better world.

As it is with Isaiah and Peter, so it is with you and me. Our ministries may be different, and we may be called to serve in different places at different times, but God needs each one of us - however unworthy we may feel – to be a part of God's incredible plan.

One of the first things that struck me when I arrived here was how part of God's dream already was becoming a reality in this congregation: persons from vastly different backgrounds gathered in this place Sunday after Sunday after Sunday to worship God and serve their neighbors. Do you realize how rare it is to see a church where young and old, rich and poor, black and white, gay and straight, native and immigrant, Republican and Democrat pray together, sing together, serve together? Do you realize how rare that is?

In most churches, as the saying goes, birds of a feather flock together. So you already are a powerful witness to God's reign. Your openness to God's presence and actions in your midst allows God to mold you, shape you, form you a congregation that reflects God's hope for the world – a world in which God – not age, not wealth, not skin color, not money, not sexual preference, not country of origin, not political affiliation – but the God of Jesus Christ holds us together. So we are well on your way. But we are not there yet. How can we become even more open to God's actions in our midst? What would be some visible signs that God's dream for this congregation is unfolding outside this sanctuary – in coffee hour? At a forum? With our guests?

Most of us may find that challenge to be a bit daunting. It's so much easier to spend our time with those who are like us. Life is already hard enough. But, like Isaiah and Peter, we are not called to narrow lives.

We are called to be bearers of good news – to tell to the people among whom we live and move and have our being that God is always up to something good – even when it seems that evil is winning, even when it seems that life is too hard, even when it seems like there is very little hope left in the world. Not everyone is called to leave everything and follow God into unfamiliar places. Whether we go with God from place to place or stay in one place for most of our lives, we are called to bring the good news of God's love to all to whom God sends – or brings – us.

But many of those who are in desperate need of good news do not look like us, or think like us, or live like us. And we are sometimes afraid of strangers. What if we try to connect with them, and we fail? What if, like Peter, we work long and hard, but still come up empty-handed? Remember though, that after Peter fails to catch any fish, Jesus asks Peter to go back and try again – try again, but this time with Jesus as his guide. Peter catches so many fish that he has to ask his friends to come and help him. The same Jesus who makes a difference for Peter is the same one who'll make the difference for us.

But that requires trusting the One who invites us into a relationship with Him, who calls us to work alongside Him, and who understands our anxiety and our ambivalence. After all,

We can take risks for God only if we believe that God would not abandon us;
We can trust that God would not abandon us only if we believe God really loves us;
We can trust that God really loves us only if we have a life-giving image of God.

Because many of us grow up with a distorted image of God, we tend to be a little wary of getting too close to God. So sometimes we avoid the very things that can help us correct that image and develop a loving, life-giving relationship with the One who made us. Things like Bible Study – I believe that studying the Bible is one of the best ways to correct a distorted image of God – not to mention the distorted image some of us have about ourselves.

Things like learning about being a good steward – that being a good steward is not about whether or not the Cathedral has an endowment. If that were the case, then the endowment – not God – would determine our level of giving. When our level of giving is tied into the endowment, the endowment has replaced God in our thinking about stewardship. In other words, the endowment has become our idol.

Good stewardship is not about how much money we do or do not have. It's about the awareness that we live and move and have our being in the presence of the Holy One; it's about receiving with gratitude the many gifts that life offers, it's about enjoying, but not holding tightly to, those gifts, it's about freely sharing those gifts with others, and, most of all, it's about the freedom that comes from living in radical dependence on the One who loves us more than we will ever know.

Jesus lived in radical dependence on God. And Jesus called Peter, James and John to do the same. But they also depended on one another. Just as Jesus did not try to do it alone, none of us is called to carry out our ministry alone. Over the years, you have gone from at least four full-time clergy, to three, to two, and now to one. When I was discerning a call to come to the Cathedral, Dean Pendleton told me that the Cathedral congregation was known for being good to its clergy. I have experienced the truth of that – you have given me lots of love, you have fed me spiritually and physically, many of you have even put up with my dog, and you have done it with grace and care. You have even put up with those sermons that found their way to those fateful words, “that reminds me of the story of . . .”

As most of you know, Dean Pendleton and I have served in ministry together for 9 ½ years. I served as his assistant in MD, and then followed him here to this Cathedral. Most assistants have the luxury of not having to make the heart-wrenching, lonely and sometimes thankless decisions that senior clergy do. Most of us don't even see that part of ministry. So I want to thank you to Dean Pendleton for your faithful leadership in this place. And if it were not for your faith in me, I would not have had the privilege of spending the last five years with this wonderful congregation. Dean Pendleton is not only my boss, my colleague, and my friend. He is my brother – and I am entrusting him to you.

When I arrived at this Cathedral five years and five weeks ago, I was a stranger to you, and you were strangers to me. If I had not said “yes” to God's call to come to this Cathedral, I would not have been able to spend the last five years experiencing God's love for me through you, and my life would have been so much the poorer for it. I am no longer among strangers – but among friends. God's call now takes me to another place, but the words of wisdom many of you have shared, the ways in which you care for one another, and the times you have reached out to the hurting folk all around us are gifts that will go with me. Your presence in my life will have a lasting impact on how I teach and lead many of tomorrow's ordained leaders. And wherever my life with God takes me, I will carry you, my friends, in my heart.