

Get Into Deep Water

Isaiah 6: 1-13

Luke 5: 1-11

Being in deep water is a time of discovery, although not usually a very pleasant or comfortable one. Deep water, being a bit different from hot water, refers to those times when we seem to have fallen overboard, or been cast out (see Jonah), or had the boat sink from beneath us, or else run into something that's pulled us away from our happy voyage and we arrive – splash! – in deep water.

There are many who look at the nation today and say this is a time of opportunity. And many others look at the nation today and say that we may be witnessing its stunning decline. Opinions about where we really are may differ, but I think it is certainly a time of deep water for us all, and the future of the nation will shake itself out in the process. Whatever the outcome, that shaking out as a process may take an extended time to work itself out, and we better get used to the uncertainty.

Of course, this isn't the first time. We can remember the upheavals in the 1960s and 1970s when the nation was in deep water, convulsed with all kinds of changes. The problem is that no one sees a clear way out; the process takes time. There is no bright light at the end of the tunnel, and the continuation of present woes becomes the popular expectation. Eventually the dust settles, the only question from then and for now is: when will we finally pass through the deep water into a manageable flow?

In both camps, many are busy saying no to what the other side wants because making changes in difficult times is counter-intuitive. In dramatic and difficult change, we want things to be safer, calmer, easier, not visionary, risky and costly. Yet improvements come from striding forward, *not* being driven by fear. When fears are the motivation, the deep water becomes more threatening, because fear doesn't produce answers and new directions, only more fear, more disillusionment, and more anxiety.

Amazingly, we are willing to foreclose our hope in the promise of what we cannot see or even perceive simply because it sits beyond our immediate awareness. That is a faith problem since faith is hope in the promise of what we cannot see. We stand in the ashes of the present and mourn, not realizing that the seeds of the next wave are driving roots into the soil even as we stand amid despair.

In our scriptures, we hear the call of Isaiah, a magnificent vision while worshiping in the temple. God is seated on a throne, the train of his robe filling the temple, and six winged seraphs proclaim "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory," shaking the temple as it filled with smoke. This could be nominated for an Academy Award for all the special effects.

Poor trembling Isaiah figures that he's done something – he doesn't know what – and God has surely come to deliver judgment in a big way. He's a sinner. He knows it, and he is a sinner among a people of sinners. There's no hiding one sinner among lots of

sinners – God can find you, and now God has found Isaiah. The poor man knows that no good thing can come from a sinner being confronted by God.

The phrase “Fear not” doesn’t appear here when you would expect it. Instead, an angel takes a live coal and applies it to Isaiah’s lips, cleansing him of his sinfulness. We can imagine Isaiah being in a state of shock that he was not incinerated or zapped by lightning or even tied to a fire anthill.

In the deep, *deep* water, Isaiah experienced grace. He was certain that all was lost, and in the midst of his awestruck confusion and despair, God did something totally unexpected and unforeseen. God touched Isaiah with the blessing of grace that turned the whole scene from one of judgment and punishment into the promise of new life.

Then God asks a rhetorical question, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” Isaiah, thrilled by the gracious forgiveness of God, enthusiastically answers, “Here I am! Send me!” God’s thinking, “That was easy.”

Now comes the mission. ‘Go and tell my useless people all these terrible things, even though they’ll never listen to you.’ Isaiah doesn’t ask the logical question, “Why bother?” That’s something smart that I would ask, however Isaiah keeps his mouth shut.

What will his mission into the deep water of the future of God’s people bring about then? How long does this mission last? *Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken.* It lasts long enough to see the end of the promise of God’s people, to witness the consequences of a life without God, without hope.

The positive notion that the lack of God’s presence will break open the hard, sinful heart and spirit of God’s people, bringing the change that returns them to faithfulness is nowhere present. Regardless, Isaiah goes forth into the deep water of the troubles of God’s people to serve as God’s prophet.

Let’s also remember that Isaiah defines himself as a sinner among sinners. He is nothing exceptional. He’s just one sinner among many. That should *disqualify* him from sacred service, yet it seems God feels Isaiah is exactly the right one to serve. Isaiah found grace in deep water, a whole new way where there had been no way before. Is there hope that Isaiah’s witness will bring change, or is Isaiah simply the vessel for God’s Word to be presented by one of their own?

In Isaiah, the deep water is a bitterly grievous place. Yet that is the mission entrusted to him by God. The deep water is a time of discovery and decision, and sometimes the prospects bear no good outcomes.

Now let’s consider what happens when Jesus teaches a crowd by Lake Gennesaret. Some fishing boats are on the beach and the fisherman are cleaning their nets. Obviously, the fishermen have been out fishing all night and have called it quits.

Jesus sees that he could address the crowd better if he was off shore in a boat. A fellow named Simon Peter who owned the boat humors the teacher and takes him out a bit from shore where the teacher continues his lesson. We don't know what it is that Jesus is teaching them. The point of the story here is not Jesus' teaching or the big crowd or anything else except what follows.

When Jesus finished teaching, he tells Simon Peter, "Let's go out in deep water and do some fishing." The fisherman is a bit miffed by this, complaining that he had already been out fishing all night and caught nothing. Peter *is* the fisherman after all; what does this teacher know about fishing? Peter has hung up his nets and is ready to head to the pub for a frosty before going home for the day. Nonetheless, Peter swallows his pride, sets aside after-work plans, and takes down the nets and readies them for further use. Out they go out into deep water.

In this deep water, the veteran fisherman Simon Peter knows that there are no fish out here; the place to catch fish is in shallower water. He is humoring this respected teacher who should stick with what he knows and leave the fishing to him. Deep water is no place to be, is it? No one in their right mind heads off into deep water, taking chances and wasting time and effort. There is nothing to be gained. Be smart and stay where the easy pickings are close to shore. Simon Peter has been doing it for years and he has gotten by just fine without chasing some wild ideas.

When they get out in the deep water, the nets are dropped. The catch is so huge that the nets are about to break. They need help from other fishermen. The total catch is so mammoth that the boats nearly sunk. A fish story?

When Jesus takes Simon Peter and the others into deep water, he is leading them into grace. Suddenly they realize that their assumptions were not accurate. There was more promise in this place than they had ever imagined. In deep water, they find grace in the stunning, unimaginable abundance that awakens them to *more* than fish. This wasn't a lucky catch, or even a good catch, a nice blessing; this was a miraculous catch, beyond reason or explanation.

Then we hear similar expressions from Peter like what we just heard from Isaiah, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." Jesus replies, "Fear not. From now on, you'll be catching God's people." With that, the fishermen leave their boats behind (full of fish?) and follow Jesus.

Jesus takes them out to deep water, daring them to risk, to take a chance that he may know something better for them. Out in the deep water, Jesus teaches the fishermen about the grace of God who is eager to bless the faithful.

This is what God's call to his people is all about. God calls us today to venture out in the deep water. God calls us to break out of our pattern, to hop out of the rut, to get of the hole. But it isn't simply change for the sake of change. God calls his people to risk, to set out into something that they don't believe will work, that they don't believe will do

any good, that they don't imagine they can handle, that they don't see any meaningful purpose to do. Once there, out in the deep water where it is different, risky and uncertain, that's when God can help them find grace, the surprising love of God who seeks us and needs us and calls us to live faithfully, reveling in his grace and care.

Sometimes we're called like the disciples and others in scripture to chuck it all and go. At other times, our mission call may be less extreme, but no less powerful as service to the Lord and his kingdom. God created us with such variety and diversity. God has blessed us with a rich abundance of gifts, talents and abilities. God is equally creative at finding ways for us to risk and to serve, to put ourselves in the unlikely and even impossible places where God wants us to be.

God has called you, whether you know it or not. I know from scripture and from experience that God tends to be relentless in pursuit of the ones he seeks. God's particular call can also change and take turns. No one ever said God was consistent or single-minded. The call can change as often as the world God created. We must always be ready for new calls.

But the call is there, for each of us, to cast off our anchor and head into deep water. That's where the grace of God will meet us and sustain and fill us for his promise and his purpose. Fear when you're in deep water leads to drowning. Deep water is the place for faith, trusting in the God who is ready to bless and provide.

Where is that deep water where God is calling each of us today?