

Homily

February 6, 2022

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

33:16-44:42

Those who write novels work very hard to fashion the opening line of the first chapter to capture the reader and to give some indication of the importance of the story they are about to tell. One such opening line is this, “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times,” Charles Dickens’ beginning of the *Tale of Two Cities*. That one catches you.

Now, we’re not hearing novels today, but we did hear at the beginning of the First Reading from Chapter 6 of Isaiah, one heck of a good opening line. “In the year King Uzziah died...” Did that get your attention? I am sure it would if you heard it for the very first time or read it for the very first time. Where is this going? Well, Isaiah’s got us hooked. What’s fascinating is the story we hear of his encounter with the Lord in the temple – is the Sixth Chapter! - The first five Chapters, he’s already been prophesying. He has been telling Judah and Israel what is wrong with them and why the Lord is displeased.

And then, “in the year King Uzziah died,” Isaiah has a vision of the Lord. And his response? “Woe is me!” Another really good line. (Thank you, Noah...Now Noah, sit down with Mommy. There you go. I’m going to lose this battle, I can tell...Where was I?) Oh. “Woe is me! I am doomed! For I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips.”

Why doomed? Well, Isaiah in his writings – not only can he come up with a good first line for Chapter 6, but he uses throughout his first 40 Chapters double-entendres, a word that has two different meanings at the same time. And “doomed” in this case, can either mean “doomed to extinction,” or “quieted,” made not to speak. A prophet made not to speak? And yet, he does.

I am a **man** of unclean lips, living among a **people** of unclean lips. In other words, I am a sinner. And I live among sinful people. And yet the Lord would appear in a vision. And the Lord sends a messenger, as we heard, with a coal – a hot coal from the altar, which is the altar of God. And touches his lips to purge away the sin, so that he might be able to now say with mouth opened, “Whom will you send? Here I am! Send me.”

The sin taken away, even as he still lives in the midst of a sinful people, Isaiah is sent on mission by the power of God, by the very hand of God. And if we read all 40 Chapters, we know it was not an

easy time for him. A little easier than Jeremiah of last week's First Reading, but still a challenge amidst a sinful people.

Our Gospel passage does not have such a well-fashioned opening line. But it surely does have one really powerful line: Simon, put your boat out to fish once again. (I paraphrased.) Simon is reluctant. He just spent the whole night on the lake fishing, without effect.

Why does he do what he did? - Get back in the boat and do what the Lord commanded.

Well, have you ever been on the side of a lake and heard people talking? Sue? Sound really carries well, doesn't it? Well! Imagine Simon and his fishing mates coming ashore and hearing the commotion of the crowd and Jesus teaching. And then this very same one, having stirred up all of these people, asked for a platform – his boat – to continue the teaching. And this Simon must have been captivated by what he heard, for he is willing to try again at the command of the Lord. This Lord who has taught so well and somehow touched him and his partners. And lo and behold, there is a massively successful catch. (This is one of those "fish stories," you know? But this one is true.) And Peter's response, "Leave me Lord. I am a sinful man."

Not, "Woohoo! Look at the big catch we made! Thank you, Jesus!" No! He sees the power of God and before that power, he says – similar to what the prophet said in the First Reading: "Leave me Lord. I am a sinful man."

But the Lord doesn't leave. The Lord accompanies him back to shore and then invites him to follow, "Come. I will make you a fisher of men." And Peter follows and seems to encourage his partners to follow, even though they too, I am sure, were sinful men.

But the Lord said, "No. Come!" This was a powerful moment in Peter's life, in this passage from the Gospel according to St. Luke.

Now we know that there was further struggle for Peter, right? He wasn't always the ideal student, the ideal learner. You can think of a few things, can't you?

His denial, which is the ultimate.

His telling Jesus: No you can't do this Messiah thing and be crucified.

His blurting things out at inappropriate moments.

But still and all, the one who said, "Leave me Lord. I am a sinful man," is still invited to mission.

“I am doomed, for I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips.” “Leave me, Lord. For I am a sinful man.” Or a sinful woman.

How do those words echo in your own experience before the Lord? How do they echo?

We’re all sinners here, my brothers and sisters. And we have all had an initial encounter with the Lord in our baptism. And we’ve had further encounters through the sacraments and other moments of our lives.

The Lord continues to invite us, in spite of your sins. You are forgiven.

Are we willing to experience that forgiveness, that purging, that reinvigorating of our mission as a Christian? Are we willing to hear that the Lord’s mercy triumphs in a sacrificial way over our sinfulness.

“In the year King Uzziah died,” a catchy way to begin a chapter. A much better way to conclude the chapter or the passage, “**Here I am. Send me.**”