

5 Epiphany Year
Isaiah 6:1–8(9–13);
Psalm 138
1 Corinthians 15:1–11
Luke 5:1–11

Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia on Sunday
February 4th 2007 by the Reverend Richard Smiraglia
“Unexpected Grace”

†In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I am an inveterate planner. I keep long lists. And I march through them in order. Part of the reason I do this is so to be sure I get things done. But part of it is because I really do not like surprises at all. I like to think that. The truth is, life is full of surprises and I find myself pretty much at the mercy of what we call “fate” every day. Nothing goes the way I want it to. And you know what? It’s a good thing.

My best friend, for instance—we have been friends now for almost twenty years. In 1987 when I first taught in New York we met briefly. But that was not when we became friends. It was about a year and a half later, when I walked down Locust Street to the corner to buy an Inquirer from the box and there he was standing on that very corner. Now, that was a coincidence. It was unexpected for sure. It turned out his sister lived around the corner from me and he was visiting for a summer weekend. We sat down and talked that afternoon, and we have been friends ever since. His first son was born just on this New Year’s eve. What a journey. Through relationships and illnesses and job crises and health crises ... and it all started by accident. And as I was thinking about this I realized there is nobody in my life who is important to me who I met through design, it has all been part of some divine comedy, some celestial accident.

We have this image over and over in today’s scripture. We have some very surprised people. We have Isaiah, who went to the Temple to pray and got turned into a prophet. We have Paul, who was walking toward Damascus when he was stricken by God. And we have Simon Peter, poor fellow, who not only has just got past dealing with his sick mother-in-law, but now he’s just spent the whole night working for nothing and into the midst of his misery comes Jesus. I think the way to sum this up is to call it unexpected grace.

Try to imagine Isaiah getting ready for work that morning. Do you think he said “I might be late for lunch today if the angels show up and touch me with burning coals?” I doubt it. I think he thought he was going to prayer and then on to work, and he probably had a list in his head like I do. But boy was he in for a shock! He gets to the Temple and when he looks up he sees these very odd creatures—angels for sure, but with snake-like bodies and human features and gigantic wings fanning the flames of God’s glory Sounds like Star-Trek, or Raiders of the Lost Ark. But there they were big as life. And what’s worse right in the middle of it God starts talking. And Isaiah

says “get me out of here, I’m just a regular guy.” Of course, God will have none of it. And the next thing he knows, Isaiah is the human voice of God Unexpected grace. Of course you know Paul’s story. He was Saul of Tarsus, a Pharisee, and his job was to persecute Christians the better to secure the fundament of the Judaism of his day. But out there on that lonely dusty road to Damascus he had something like a stroke, except when he awoke Jesus was talking to him. And now a generation later he is writing to one of the churches he founded in Greece—a long walk from Damascus mind you—and he says: “By the grace of God I am what I am.” And indeed he is. Unexpected grace.

Then there is poor Simon Peter. We all think this story is about Jesus and his mighty power but I think it is about Simon and his brush with grace. Simon is the one who has to work night and day. He has a wife and family, and his mother-in law was sick, but Jesus healed her. But still this guy has to work very hard to make ends meet. And when we find him he is beside his boat cleaning up. He has been fishing all night. And he has caught nothing. He is going to have to go home and say “I’m broke.” But first he has to clean the boat and the tackle and all the rest of it and get things ready for tomorrow night. I can just see it: teeth grinding, pounding his fists. Like Isaiah this is a man least interested, least available, least wanting an intervention with God.

And yet all of a sudden, whether he likes it or not, this itinerant preacher comes along and huge crowds are with him and he gets in Simon’s boat and says pull out a little bit so I can address the crowds. Go ahead, go down to the Delaware River after church, walk up to the first boat you see and tell the owner to pull out into the river for you. See what happens!

Well I suppose the surprise is that Simon does it. He pulls out a bit and Jesus preaches to this huge crowd. And then Jesus tells him to drop his nets into the water. This is just too much for a bone-tired weary fisherman and he says so. But, of course, he does it. And disaster follows. There are so many fish that the nets tear and the boat begins to sink. Like Isaiah and Paul, Peter says “go away Lord” and yet God’s unexpected grace is upon him.

I think God is trying to tell us something here. I think God is trying to tell us to stay awake, because we never know when unexpected grace will come upon us. We never know when the stranger by the newspaper box will become our best friend. We never know when an already miserable workday will become even worse and yet into the midst of it will come Jesus himself. And that is just how it is. Life is full of hard work and confusion and things that do not go the way we want them to and then all of a sudden when we least expect it, indeed, when we least welcome it—there is God, and there is God’s unexpected grace, flying into the middle of things, changing everything utterly. The Gospel says Peter and James and John all left everything and followed Jesus. Unexpected grace changed their lives. But it was no Hollywood moment. There were no bells ringing. There was no brass band. There were just two boats full of stinking fish and households still to be fed and relatives still in need of healthcare.

My friends Jesus is no magician. And the gift of God's salvation is no lottery prize. But Jesus is God incarnate. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. Nobody needs rescuing from a magical life of riches. But we all need rescuing from the tangled lives we create in the recesses of our own souls. We all need rescuing from the webs of lies we tell ourselves and each other. And we all definitely need rescuing from the lives we build apart from God.

When Isaiah protests his call God tells him to preach to the people to listen but not hear, to look but not see, so they can get it. God means, stop weaving lies in your heart, stop telling yourself that you are God, stop trying to run the world with your lists. Let God be God. Let God in. Letting God in, that is what it means to have the gift of unexpected grace Stop, abandon all that in your own way keeps you apart from God. Turn, and be healed.

Isaiah's job is to tell his people that their lack of faith will doom them. Paul's job is to walk the earth proclaiming the good news of salvation in Christ Jesus. Simon's job will be to be the bedrock of Jesus' ministry and the founder of Jesus' church. And our job, our job is to turn to God, our job is to turn to God and be healed by the power of God's love. Our job is to so shine with God's love that everyone we meet is kissed with God's unexpected grace.

This is what it means to be fishers of men (as it used to say in the old translation), to cast our nets into the dark waters of hopelessness and despair and bring in an enormous harvest of salvation. Jesus said: "Do not be afraid, for you—will be catching people." Amen.

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