

*Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, 2he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. 3He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. 4When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." 5Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." 6When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. 7So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. 8But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" 9For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; 10and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." 11When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.*

When I was a child in school, I read and heard of Auschwitz and I wondered, "Where were the good people then?"

As years passed I heard stories about the McCarthy era, when suspicions of subversive activity, mere suspicions, were enough to ruin careers. I wondered, "Why didn't the good people speak out then?"

One day I began reading the book, "Roots" and my heart ached for people crowded into slave ships, the thought of being squeezed into a putrid space for months on end made me tremble. "Where were the good people who could have stopped it all?" I wondered.

As I thought of each of these things there was some comfort for me. I'm not like those folks who quietly sat by as injustice was done, I told myself. When I am of an age to have power, it will be different for me.

Lately I've come to an awful realization. It's my turn. If I am ever going to do anything about the world, the time has come. My grandchildren and great-grandchildren will read of these days and ask, "What did you do Grandpa when the crisis of the 90's was occurring? What did you do when families were being torn apart, when many of the young no longer knew right from wrong? What did you do when fewer and fewer people were listening for God's word, but rather seeking to be entertained by the church? What did you say to the selfishness in government, in business, in the church that left the rich richer and the poor poorer? Where were the good people, Grandpa, when the cities became unsafe, and the government chose to protect the interest of defense contractors and the S&L's rather than the poor?"

Will they be satisfied with, "I was minding my own business, taking care of my own needs, my own interests?"

Will they be satisfied with, "We were all like twigs in a flood, swept along in a swollen stream."

Will they be satisfied with, "I spoke wise words back then, but no one listened. I was ready to lead, but no one would follow. I was wiser than all the leaders and the church and business and in government, but no one could see my wisdom."

If theirs is a world of more crime, more fear, more pollution, less freedom, less opportunity, less hope, then I am sure our excuses will satisfy them not at all.

Today our lessons are about three people who were God's people in their time. Thousands of years later we remember them. God touched his creation through their words and deeds. Isaiah, Peter, Paul.

If we are going to make a difference in God's creation in these days, we must learn from them.

In the year King Uzziash died, Isaiah was granted a vision - he saw the Lord, surrounded by heavenly creatures who sang, "Holy Holy Holy." Isaiah cried out, "Woe is me, I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.

Then one of the creatures flew to him, and took a live coal from the altar and touched his lips. His guilt had been singed out of existence. Then God sent him as prophet to speak to God's people.

Unworthiness, guilt – forgiveness, grace - serving God with power. So it was with Isaiah.

Hundreds of years pass.

One day a fisherman, Simon Peter, was cleaning nets. And Jesus used his boat to stand upon as he spoke to the crowds. After a while Jesus suggested they go fishing. Peter who had spent the night in futile fishing, agreed to do as Jesus asked. Suddenly the nets were so full, the boats were sinking.

"Go away from me Lord," Peter cried out, "for I am a sinful man."

But Jesus in a word of grace and forgiveness said, "Do not be afraid, from now on you will be catching people."

A few years passed. A man named Saul was intent on preserving the faith for generations to come. He was intent that this new faith in Jesus would not dilute or destroy the faith of his fathers and grandfathers and great-grandfathers. He had received papers allowing him to arrest Christians in Damascus and bring them to Jerusalem for trial.

But on his way the resurrected Jesus appeared to him in a blinding light. “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” he asked. From that moment Saul was changed, took a new name Paul, and brought a great many to faith. With Isaiah and Peter and Paul the pattern was the same. They were encountered by God. They were overwhelmed by their own unworthiness. But God lifted them up. His grace as a gift set them on their feet, and sent them into the world as his servants.

We begin our worship with repentance. Now for you and I that may be an empty act - words - kneeling; a standing up again - week after week a ritual.

Or this may be the most honest thing we do all week as we come before God recognizing just who this is, the Holy One Jesus, the one who sees us as we are, the only one raised out of death into eternal life. If we know who God is, and acknowledge who we are, then we will join Isaiah, “Woe is me, for I am a person of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.” We will join Peter, “Depart from me Lord for I am a sinful person.” We will join Paul in knowing that “I am the least of all, unfit to be called one of Christ's own.”

And when we know we deserve nothing but wrath, God in Christ gives us nothing but love – grace - the entire forgiveness of all our sins. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We stand, and wait to be sent - under no illusions about our importance or worthiness, but certain of the power of the one who sends us: The God of Isaiah, the Lord of Peter, the Spirit who filled Paul. We rise certain that “by the grace of God I am what I am and his grace toward me is not in vain.”

Those are Paul's words, and they must be yours. By the grace of God you are what you are and his grace toward you is not in vain.

I do not know what God's spirit will have us do. I do not know what my role shall be in this generation. But I do know that as we are honest before God and led by his Spirit that we

will never need apologize to those who come after us. If God is powerful in us, his will done in us, then the world will be blessed.

I'd like to share something that went on inside of me this past week. For months I'd been feeling responsible for the future of our cities. You should laugh when you hear that. Who am I? Yet I have been feeling that I should have a clear direction to lead you so that we might turn our nation around. I've been searching for solutions to crime, education in the Cleveland schools, solutions to drugs and gangs and welfare. IF not us, then who will care enough, be wise enough to make a difference.

Thursday God taught me something.

I was gathered with the Cleveland area Lutheran pastors to hear the Reverend Marvin McMickle, pastor of Antioch Baptist Church and the head of the NAACP in Cleveland. I went expecting little from him, he's black, not as smart as I, I was sure, probably so much a part of the problem that he did not understand as well as I.

After I heard him speak, I was Isaiah, crying, "Woe is me." I was Peter, aware as never before of my sinfulness, I was Paul aware of the resurrected Lord in a way I had never been before.

For I was sure that I was witnessing the Spirit of the Lord in a man who treated us with honesty, respect, graciousness. I heard him tell of things I did not know, and tell as a brother. I had judged him, but he had not judged me.

I left that place with a great burden lifted from me. The Lord is not going to depend on Lynn Schlessman to solve the city's problems, for he has other servants also. Like Marvin McMickle. That is good news.

Yet I pray that as we stand through the grace of God, we will each hear his call, "Whom shall I send, and who shall go for us?" And we will answer with Isaiah each day, "Here am I, Send me." For God will be powerful in you and in me.

And the world will be blessed.