

ISAIAH 6:1-8, (9-13)
PSALM 138
I CORINTHIANS 15:1-11
LUKE 5:1-11

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 6, 2022; Year C

Calling Out the Called!

“God’s will!” Every time I hear that phrase, I shudder for some strange reason, perhaps because it brings back so many unpleasant memories from my ecclesial, theological past, literally a cacophony of discordant voices haunting my subconscious. Yes, it sends the proverbial chills up my spine! As I jokingly tell people, we former Southern Baptist types are never out of danger, always in recovery! My hunch is that this dynamic describes a lot of individuals who came out of restrictive, narrow, way too traditional environments, emerging from the stifling and suffocating restrictions of whatever brand of fundamentalism sought to confine and constrain, desperately seeking to choke the very life out of them. PTSD! Until we began to see this horrific phenomenon terrorizing and tormenting our returning military personnel as they made their way home from Iraq and Afghanistan, and other hotspot regions of the world, many of us had never heard the term PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) and, of course, therefore did not have the foggiest clue what it was, much less what it did to people, the toll it took exacting its horrific negative residuals, the horrendously damaging effects it placed on the psyche, the body and soul of emotionally, mentally, physically, spiritually, persons who had become, not of their own volition, immensely vulnerably compromised. A threat to even one of these core humanist areas debilitating to a major degree, but just imagine the negative effects when all these human circuits are affected. For many of us who were reared in these strict ecclesial enclaves, we now realize that we still carry the residual of our own brand of PTSD, call it a knockoff version which might be

inappropriate to make the comparison. Much less severe, but no less significant, no less impactful! **All of which brings me back to my initial observation about the mysterious and intriguing concept of “God’s will!”**

Today our lectionary texts take us on a fabulous journey through another theological mystery wrapped in much enigma, and that is this elusive thing we call “God’s call!” Citing once again my initial remarks, back in the day there once was a tremendous, almost obsessively compulsive, myopic focus on discovering the call of God in your life, discovering God’s will, and finding ways to fulfill that sacred duty, whatever that may be, obedient to this seriously non-negotiable imprimatur on your life, a divine stamp that was to be honored with no distractions, no qualifications, no equivocations or hesitations, no ifs, ands, or buts. Disobedience, failure to comply, would always mean a life given over to second guessing, every aspect of our decisions or lack thereof characterized by abject misery. To deny, defer, or deflect this more-than-sensory experience, this intuitive awareness, unique to our individuality, was to disregard, dishearten, and disappoint God while very discouraging to those who were struggling with this major dilemma. Inevitably, invariably, defacto, we believed we were knowingly choosing to live a lie, selectively embracing and engaging a life in torment, tormented by willfully and stubbornly showing a certain arrogance or hubris, a selfish level of recalcitrant resistance, fully aware that whatever we were doing, whatever path we ultimately chose, that we chose the wrong one and we were not doing “God’s will!” After all, God’s business was not our business! Never the twain should meet or merge! Yes, according to many pompous pulpiteers God was presented as insensitively distant, and thus totally unconcerned about our narcissistic needs, much less our selfish wants! I mean, what is our motivation? Psychologically tormented, even tortured, we were running away like the mythical figure Jonah, who on his ill-fated trip to Tarshish to escape his

appointed preaching date at Nineveh just kept descending, fleeing from the call of God, all the while sinking into the mire, as one revivalist preacher boomed, going down, down, down, down to Joppa and down in the belly of the big fish! You get the picture!

Come to think of it, this focus on discerning the call of God and its accompanying obsession with discovering God's will reminds me of another phrase, one I really detest, one that conveniently happens in churches whenever someone suggests acting on a proposal that is either challenging, cutting edge or controversial, "let's pray about it!" It is a convenient way to sanitize, to spiritualize any issue de jour, to table a motion, to cut off any debate, discussion or dialogue, once again to dismiss or disregard, to deny, defer, or deflect, a brilliant religiously pious tactic designed to halt what is perceived by the perpetrator an uncomfortable and/or untenable position, to stop a communal process in its tracks, all intended to rebuke what others dare to believe might be God's will. But I digress; I often do! Yes, the challenge of knowing, of discerning, declaring, and then doing the will of God, God's will, was more than a might monumental, overwhelming, debilitating, destructively agonizing and guilt-producing, leaving one with a sense of disappointment and dread, haunted by the anguish of a multitude of insecurities, fear and anxiety, never able to find peace or be at peace, because deep in your soul, somewhere in your Spirit, that uncomfortable feeling down in your gut, that you were living a lie, a false narrative, and that, like the Emperor who wore no clothes or Don Quixote's infamous windmill chasing and battling, you knew that everyone else knew and was watching you with disdain and disgust, and perhaps, like with Job's helpful friends, including a dose of pity, all leading to much despair. And not only that, but you believed that you had disappointed God, this dirty little secret you carried around like an anvil, your very presence lit up like a neon light, blinking no doubt!

What a debilitatingly hopeless and graceless place to be, the mercy, peace, and love of the Holy nowhere to be found on your radar, you believing in your heart that at the core of your being that you were the epitome, the posterchild, of abject failure, a frail and flawed human being who seemed almost beyond hope and help because you had failed to follow the footsteps God ordained for you at creation, from the foundation of the universe, like with the call of Samuel, reportedly known and formed from within the safe confines of his mother's warmly protective womb. Folks, ignoring God's calling on your life was just no good place to be, the heaviest load to bare, no good to come from any of it, nowhere in sight! All because you grew up in an environment that turned God into a transactional deity, a button pusher in the sky who had pushed your buttons but had been summarily rejected, all because you supposedly avoided or ignored the voices in your head, whether they be real or imagined. Yes, we must always be open to the possibility, that despite our sincerest, most honest, internal conversations, those wonderful debates and dialogues taking place inside ourselves, that we may in actuality be delusional about these religious persuasions going on within us. Yikes!

Surely, the idea of God's calling, whatever any myriad manifestations of anointing might look like, surely it was not designed to make us miserable, to exacerbate our agonizing predicaments, to fuel or nurture a debilitating and immobility, causing a certain catatonia as we add to and heap upon ourselves a preposterous amount of self-doubting and loathing, that surely, was by divine design meant to bless us, to embolden and empower us, yes, to more than enable us to live fully, to more than mere existence, but to love exponentially, to become all, the best, that God wants us to be even as we find our own unique pathway, our own destiny, the God-given grace guiding and undergirding our humanity. Surely! Turning a corner here, when I read these wonderful, life-giving texts today, sacred narratives offering insight, scriptures offering a window into the amazing ways

that God once presumably spoke and is presumably still speaking now, continuing to call human beings into a fulfillment of whatever it is that peaks their interest and imagination, that stimulates their intellectual curiosity, that enhances their critical thinking, and yes, that gives them overflowing fulfillment, successes in whatever they choose to do and to be, all working in concert, in harmony together to help us become all we can be and to help make our world a better, more serendipitous, place to live and move and have our being, individually and collectively. And yes, that was more than a mouthful!

I believe with all my heart, mind, and soul, that we are created a blank slate and that the call of God on our lives is not a demonstrative voice screaming in our ear, demanding that we go in a particular, a specific, direction, but that it is rather the still, small voice, the soft and subtle sound of sheer silence, to use that beautiful imagery from Elijah's hideout in a cave, a hushed tone that indeed speaks softly, nudging us, but never coercing us, never locking us into the narrow confines of anything that threatens to suck the very life out of us, yes, the voices in our heads that indeed often suck, killing the serendipity of our imagination and creativity. Even so, so much of this thing we strangely refer to as God's could indeed possibly be the stuff of our own creation, our own delusions, some might even say probably so. It is our prerogative, even though we know better, to, boldly or cautiously, make up twisted interpretations of the biblical narrative to suit our needs or certain situations and circumstances, the scenarios that portray our lives. Yes, all too often we are prone to literalize scripture, invoking stories like the call of Samuel from the womb, or the loud and booming voice that named God as Yahweh and gave clear instructions to Moses about his future role as liberator, or the lightning bolt that struck so near Paul that it shook the foundations of his very soul, turning him from a persecutorial murderer of Christians into one of them, risking his own life and limb, his new faith expression eventually bringing about his downfall, demanding his death, along

with the very same kind of lightning bolt many years later that scared the living hell out of Martin Luther and drove him to the monastery, the priesthood, and eventually a radically heretical reformer who accidentally sparked the Protestant Reformation, starting the most incredible ecclesial revolution in history. Were these events random, happenstance? Were they literal, divinely directed from the lips of God? Were they the result of human machinations or divine fiat? Were they real or imagined? Yes, there is that delusion factor again! The answer, I believe, was a resounding “yes” to not option A, B, C, or D, but all the above! Yes, this is the mysterious way that the mystery we define as God works in the world and in our lives.

I love the story of that amazing, incredible, and clearly unique, experience of the prophet Isaiah as he experienced the Holy in a most magnificent, technicolor kind of way, as he experienced the mystery of transcendence, the invocation of mysterious reality, calling forth wonder and awe and all of it magically manifest in a dream, a vision that was so tangibly real that he was able to recall it in detail and write about its every nuance. It was so amazingly real to him that it not only seemed so much far more than a routine, conventional, dream, more than any ordinary vision could convey, but surely could have only come from God. And yet, surely it was Isaiah’s dreaming that, to use a Star Trek image, teleported him to another dimension, another reality, a suspended or frozen moment in time that would change the course of his life, altering his very being, and no doubt making a huge impact, a colossal, ginormous difference in the lives of the people to whom he preached, proclaimed, and prophesied, yes, changing his world. And yes, one whose words were once written, preserved for all time, yes, in perpetuity, that they might continue to speak a relevant word to our contemporary, twenty-first century context as we read them in real time. What I love most about Isaiah’s prophecy is his combination of God’s call and the worshipping scenario that framed his most unlikely, but very welcome, encounter with the Holy! Holy, holy, holy indeed! And perhaps it is that synthesis, that sacred intersection, a weaving

together, an intertwining of the worship of God and the call of God with the humblest human response, yes, presuming God's will, that all combined, comingled as one, provides a vital key to our understanding, unlocking a part, no doubt a very small part, of the sacred reason we gather as beloved faith community every week to offer our gift of worship, knowing what a limited, finite, audaciously arrogant exercise this thing we call worship, this thing we do, really is. Yes, we give it our all, our best shot and that is all, the best and most we can do, and thank God, we believe it is enough, confident that a loving and gracious God will make up the difference, that God will gladly accept our gifts with divine and glorious gratitude. Still!

In this one short portion of Isaiah from the sixth chapter, we are privy to the basic components of worship, including praise, confession, forgiveness, a declarative word, a very brief sermon, yea—good luck with that, after all, you pay me by the word and I am full of it, I mean, them—and, of course, a call to action, and yes, a response to all that has taken place, to all that has occurred before. It is a wonderful paradigm, a formula or framework, that should guide all our worshipping efforts, our planning and implementation of this most sacred enterprise that is priority one, the most important thing we do, among many important things we do, anything a congregation chooses to do as a corporate entity, as beloved faith community. From this day forward, Isaiah would be that prophet, called of God, preaching the word of God, God's will, as he best understood it, to a people who yearned to hear a word that they would perceive to be of divine origin, even when that word was difficult to hear, a convicting, searing, word of judgment and condemnation, a rebuke of whatever it was at the time that was proving untoward in the moment. Calling out the called in this visually graphic dream, talk about creative visualization on steroids, God asks no one in particular, specifically addressing Isaiah, because, after all it was his dream, his vision, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" There was only one

answer that would suffice, only one response would do, only one step that an obviously moved Isaiah could make, only these select words could he utter in that bellwether moment in time, “Here am I; send me!” Perhaps Isaiah was the one called because he was the one who answered! Of course, it was his dream alone so could any other outcome have been expected! Even so, point made, and the rest was history as we say, yes, for this prophet, for his people, and even for the God who called him out of a dreamy vision in what became a most intimate and special sacramental moments.

It is a long leap from Isaiah’s story to the call of James and John and Simon, three of the more noteworthy disciples called by Jesus to learn from the master Rabbi, to be his loyal and faithful students, eager proteges, curious mentees, virginal novitiates of all things Jesus-like. What I love about the story is the ordinariness of it, the routine of events as they were taking place in real time. It was just another day on the lake, the lake of Gennesaret, another day of angling, fishing to put food on the table and hopefully making a meager income to pay the bills, just another average day in the life of Simon who would become Peter, James and John, the erstwhile sons of Zebedee, perhaps known as old man Zeb’s sons. Yes, they were all partners and no doubt friends, doing the thing they knew so well, the lifestyle that had come to define them. Yes, it was all about making a living! Nine to five not an option, sometimes all night long, yes, the longest days! No clock to punch! No boss to answer! Life was good, at least as good as it could be in this heavily taxed profession. But hey, everybody had to pay uncle Caesar! And in the twinkling of an eye, everything shifted on the fly, changed on a dime, nothing to ever be the same again, even in those brief moments after Jesus’ death when they thought they could go back to the way things were and resume their fishing career. Just how’d that work out? Thank God, it did not!

Who knows why Jesus took a shine to those three amigos, dare we call them Musketeers? What sparked his interest in them? Surely, there was nothing unusual about them, nothing that stood out from the crowd because they were as ordinary as ordinary could get, no doubt a rough and rowdy, bawdy menagerie. I mean, what a bunch this bunch was! Surely, they had the character of a sailor, with the vocabulary and imbibing ability to match! Was it a matter of convenience? Jesus needed some disciples, some men to get the job done, and they just happened to be in the right or wrong place at the right or wrong time. There is always so much these Gospel stories do not tell us, so much left untold. They leave us wanting and wanting for more! Maybe Jesus felt sorry for them, for after all they had fished all night and had not caught the first fish. Maybe he thought they needed a new day job! The nerve of this carpenter man to tell us how to do our jobs, to insist that we take our freshly cleaned nets, no cleaning fish here, and go back out into the lake and let down the nets once more in the very same spots that just came up goose eggs. Now, of all times, was not even a good time to fish, the heat of the day burning down on the water not at all an opportune time to catch fish. They all naturally tended to go deeper, beyond the reach of the longest net, to avoid the hot, blistering, sunlight. What can carpenter boy teach us? What can he possibly show us? What does he know? Who is this man who had the audacious nerve to get into one of our boats without permission, major assumption here, and begin teaching all this religious nonsense? Cast on the other side! So, for some unknown reason, perhaps to humor this strange person, Simon and James and John reluctantly but willingly let down their nets for what seemed the umpteenth time and suddenly they were overrun with piscatorial bliss, more fish than they could count and barely capture. Who knew? Would somebody please make some sense out of this one? And suddenly the great catch of fish seemed like bycatch, a byproduct of all that had magically, miraculously taken place. Evidently, these three wide-eyed, absolutely mesmerized, men did not even stick around to count their catch, much less clean them, or even

bother to sell them. The next time they would find themselves fishing, they indeed would count their catch even as they counted the cost of all that had gone before them over the last three incredibly busy years. On this bellwether day, however, the about-to-be called disciples quit while they were ahead, immediately choosing to follow this man of mystery and intrigue because he had their undivided attention, and they knew he was up to something, and they desperately wanted to be a part of whatever it was he was about to do. And as we say, the rest is history! Let me tell you, being a fishing fanatic myself, it takes a whole lot of persuasive ability to get me off the water. I am one of those one more cast type guys. Yes, this fishing trinity saw something and what they saw moved them unlike anything that had ever had a chance of moving them before. So much for fishing for fish. They were going to learn how to catch people! Wow, what an immediate transformation! And this was just the tip of the proverbial iceberg! Much more to come! Yes, calling out the called! Yes, finding God's will! It can and does happen when we least expect it and when we are simply going about our business, no special effects needed, no religious coercion necessary. Wow, what a story! And yes, it is the story of us all, the story of every person, and that is what makes it so wonderfully appealing and certainly ingratiating to all of us average Janes and Joes.

Acknowledging the role that environment plays in so much of life's scenarios, no doubt driving any orientation toward a particular call, lifestyle, or livelihood, including the influential impact of mentors and the pull of peer pressure, a desire to avoid letting down those who have guided, nudged, and politely persuaded or coercively tugged at the heartstrings, confusing the mind, sometimes yielding way too much undue influence, surely there is still somewhere and somehow in the mix and the midst the mystery of the universe, a divine energy at work, a sacred component lurking in the wings, giving the most subtle and serendipitous direction and guidance. Yes, situations and circumstances, and of course, context, context, context, all command

attention, exacting a certain amount of control, even to the point of exerting ultimate sway. I mean think about it, the number of men who suddenly felt the strong urge, the tugging and pull, yes, claiming a divine call to attend seminary and enter the ministry as their life's vocation, their convincing answer to God coincidentally and conveniently happening at the onset and ongoing conflict called the Vietnam War. It was literally a "get out of jail free" card, a quick and easy fix, a great way to dodge the draft and avoid the slings and arrows of military life, which in all honesty frequently became a death sentence, yes, the deadliest of consequences. Defining this elusive thing we call God's calling, yes, discerning God's will, is fraught with complexities, including both the fickleness of our humanity and the assumed transcendence of God-presence.

So, here is what I think as we try and unlock these calling mysteries portending the revelation of God's will in our lives. I believe that God offers numerous doors, presenting an unlimited plethora of windows, each one allowing for a host of different, distinct, possibilities, all providing countless avenues enabling and encouraging, even emboldening and empowering, our best lives, ensuring that we become the best, the most we can be, fully loving, fully integrated as holistic persons. All of us human types must find the path that best suits us, that makes our engines purr, whatever it is that makes us tick, that is life giving and affirming, that makes us want to get out of bed in the morning, an urgent desire to start a new day and a new dawn every day. In the final analysis, as arrogant as my proposal may be, here is what else I not only think, but that I know, and that is the baseline call we are all called to answer, the divine mandate declared to everyone who chooses to become a follower of Jesus, embracing the desire to fulfill the best aspects of what it means to be a Christian, to dutifully, gladly and joyfully, obey the supreme commandment to become self-sacrificing while always putting God and others first, never forgetting our own needs and wants, always seeking to find

balance, a healthy equilibrium. We are all called, called out to be advocates, activists, for social justice, to embody a welcoming and inclusive spirit, yes, to be “extravagantly welcoming,” expansively inclusive, radically hospitable, and vulnerably open. These are non-negotiables, much more than mere lip service, far more than just a plank in God’s loving agenda. They are the very essence of the gospel. We all share in this sacred call in these holy and herculean tasks. Once again, what is required of us, so says the prophet Micah, is God’s providential will for each and every one of us. This holiest of opportunities constantly presenting themselves inspires us to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God, yes, a willing spirit, and once more, with joy and gladness. These tenets of faithfulness need no interpretive skill, no exegetical research, no hermeneutical inquiry, you know, all that sophisticate biblical stuff. No one on planet earth can predict or choreograph your pathway, orchestrating the twists and turns you take each and every day as you build your life’s resume. No one has that right! It cannot be hijacked, taken or stolen from you in any way whatsoever. After all, it is your pathway, your destiny! Yes, all of us together can all affirm our collective call as beloved faith community, to follow through on that which is mandated by the God we serve and the Christ we follow, to do no harm, but to do good here and now in the present and, moving forward into what we pray will be our brightest futures, individually as specially created images of the Divine and collectively as beloved faith community, and that is to always and everywhere to love God, to love neighbor, and to love self, always sensitive, showing deference to those who are identified as the other, as outcasts, the widows and orphans in our time and place, all the vulnerably compromised who live on the margins, on the fringes of society, any who are marginalized in any way, disenfranchised in any capacity whatsoever, “no matter who they are or where they are on life’s journey,” because they are loved and valued unequivocally and exponentially by God. As far as calling out the called goes and as far as God’s will goes, this is

the best I can offer, the most I can give. Anything more would be to say too much. And yes, I do have that propensity. It seems to be a gift that keeps on giving, that is always lurking in the wings, nipping at my heels. That being said, saying anything less and I would be remiss and should have said nothing and just kept my mouth shut! So here goes, some well wishes and prayers for the journey! Go forth! God's will! Good luck! Godspeed! God bless! After all, all of us have been called and God is still calling out the called, and yes, that includes the likes of you and me!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and who keeps on calling, hoping we will answer! Amen and amen!