

“Beyond Fear, Beyond Forgiveness”
February 9, 2025

Isaiah 6:1-8
Luke 5:1-11

I said last Sunday that I’m centering my preaching this month on the stories about the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. It seems good to walk along with Jesus as he preaches and calls followers and heals.

And I warned those who were here—as I warn all of you today—that when we walk along with Jesus, he usually takes us someplace unexpected, maybe even someplace we’d rather not go. So it is that this morning we find ourselves confronted with failure and sin—and not just the failure and sin of others, but our own as well!

I’m safe in saying that nearly everyone here today has known some failure in their lives: poor grades at school, a project that fell flat, a missed promotion, a relationship that unraveled. I won’t ask for a show of hands. And actually, I’m probably safe in saying that *all* of us know about failure. Even with all our planning and expertise, not everything works out.

If we let it, failure can lead to discouragement, even despair.

If we let it, failure can become the opportunity to begin again.

We are familiar with failure.

The stories in the Bible, on the other hand, often have a strange, *unfamiliar* quality about them. They often tell of things we haven’t experienced, of things we don’t understand. Isaiah stands in the temple filled with incense smoke and six-winged seraphim. He has come into the presence of God. Peter stands in a boat filled—in a way not easily explained—with a large catch of fish. He, too, has come into the presence of God.

Our lives, our minds, have very little room for such events.

But listen once more!

The scripture lessons we heard this morning begin with failure. We can understand that!

Isaiah attempted to influence the political situation in Judah, warning the despicable King Ahaz of the disaster to come. Isaiah was eloquent—and his bold words went unheeded. He prophesied without success.

Peter and his companions fished through the night. Remember, this is their profession—so they knew what they’re doing. They have the skill, the experience. And they have no fish. What would become a decisive event in Peter’s life begins with failure.

Failure we understand.

Scripture is interested in what comes *after* the failure that is all too familiar.

There in the temple, after his failure, Isaiah looks back on his call to be a prophet. He was no success. But he remembers God's question: "Whom shall I send?" And he remembers his own daring answer: "Here I am; send me."

And there at the lake, Peter and his companions have brought their boats to the shore and are washing their empty nets—cleaning up with nothing to show for their work. Seeing an opportunity, Jesus uses Peter's boat for a pulpit. When he finishes teaching the crowds, Jesus tells Peter: "Put out into deep water and let down your nets for a catch."

We can imagine any number of responses that Peter might have made. First, he tells Jesus about the reality of the situation: "We have worked all night long but have caught nothing."

It is easy to give up.

A poor report card makes you think it's not even worth trying to study or learn. A business venture that doesn't last can leave you filled with doubt. A shattered relationship can shatter hope for the future as well. Election results that weren't desired can leave people and an entire political party despairing—"in the wilderness" is how it's often described.

It is easy to give up. But God does not give up. Six times we are knocked down. Seven times we hear the call: "Get up."

In the aftermath of failure, when little seems possible, a new word comes to Peter: "Put out...Let down..." Try yet again—contrary to all that your mind tells you about your prospects for success.

The very word of God is spoken in life as we know it, in the wake of our failure and disappointment and despair. "Let down your nets for a catch."

Perhaps with a sigh, Peter responds to this carpenter who must know next to nothing about fishing: "If you say so, I will let down the nets."

Peter, certain that Jesus doesn't know what he is talking about, throws his net overboard. In faith we accept the invitation to "try again."

A student finds the book and begins to study again. A discouraged person chooses to get out of bed in the morning. Even in despair, we once again pay close attention to all that is happening.

In faith, we move beyond failure.

Which brings us to forgiveness.

An encounter with God is not necessarily pleasant. Even an experience of the God who says, "Try again" has its drawbacks. Scripture warns us: "It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God." And Isaiah likened his experience to that of having a hot coal touch his lips.

To come into God's presence is to become keenly aware of the distance between ourselves and the holy.

"Woe is me," Isaiah cries in the temple. "I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell among a people of unclean lips." The prophet is no different than anyone else. He speaks not of moral inferiority but of the pervasive human separation from the divine, from our neighbors, and even from the good in ourselves. There is no specific lapse involved here. Just a deep sense of "missing the

mark”—which is how we might best translate the Greek word used in the New Testament that we usually translate as “sin.”

We—all of us—routinely fail to hit the bull’s eye. Scott Peck put it this way: “Be perfectly honest with yourself and you will realize that you sin. If you do not realize it, then you are not perfectly honest with yourself, which is itself a sin.”¹

Peter, being as honest as he can, falls to his knees before Jesus and says: “Depart from me, Lord, for I have missed the mark.” For all of us, the arrow flies wide of the target. A look at our own lives each day shows just how close we are to Isaiah and Peter.

Of course, that’s good news because it means that we can come together on common ground. No one in this room has the high ground. When someone says, “The church is full of hypocrites and sinners,” we smile and respond by saying “Sure, and we’re always willing to scoot over to make room for one more.”

That’s why I like the story of the man who was looking for a church to attend. He entered one in which the congregation was reading together from a prayer book: “We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.” The man dropped into a seat and sighed with relief as he said to himself: “Thank goodness, I’ve found my crowd at last.”

It is good, isn’t it, when we find a crowd, well, like this one.

It’s good when we find a crowd of sinners—like this one.

Yes, there is good news here.

God forgives, bridging the gap between the human and the holy. Sometimes forgiveness can feel like a burning hot coal. It touches the very heart of who you are, leaving you a different person—not necessarily better, but forgiven.

Instead of calling it quits, instead of starting over with someone else, God chooses forgiveness.

Forgiveness burns—and it also heals.

Are we “good enough?” I don’t know. Probably not. Scripture suggests that it doesn’t really matter. No amount of self-justification is a substitute for the forgiving love that God offers.

So, here’s what came as a surprise to me as I read that story of Peter again this week. Maybe it came as a surprise to you as well: In faith, we move beyond forgiveness.

Peter listens as Jesus says to him what he says to so many, even to us: “Do not be afraid.” Stop shaking in your fishing boots.

Curiously, Jesus doesn’t add: “Your sins are forgiven,” which is what I expected.

Instead, Jesus says: “From now on you will be catching people.” And that’s kind of a strange thing to say. Many have been conditioned to think of this as meaning that Peter will be out seeking followers of Christ—hauling in such a great number that the boat of the church begins to sink.

But Jesus might be saying: “From now on, you will be doing something different. You will be doing something similar to what you know and yet at the same time, something wildly different from anything you have known. Much will be unexpected. Success is not guaranteed. But in faithful failure you will learn new things and do more than you can imagine.”

Beyond failure, beyond forgiveness, we hear the call to follow in the ways of Jesus Christ, known and to be made known to us.

Peter, James, and John and countless other women and men did not stay where they were. They did not continue doing what they had always done.

Liberal Christians are not content to stay within church buildings. We go out from places like this to start schools and hospitals, to feed the hungry, to provide shelter for the homeless nearby and in far off places.

The mission of this congregation, then, is not something handled by a committee meeting once a month. It is our response as the people of God gathered in this place.

And you know this: the demands of these days are great. The challenges to our liberal Christian faith have begun and will continue: attacks on churches and denominations who still seek to welcome refugees, who still dare to call for and do the work of feeding the hungry wherever they might be; the calls to deport or censure those who preach the gospel of compassion and mercy as God has shown it to them.

What’s the old Bob Marley song say? “Get up. Stand up. Don’t give up the fight.”

Try once more.

Go and tell. Show God's love.

And they left everything—even their reluctance—and followed.

Beyond failure, beyond forgiveness, we continue to hear the empowering call of God.

May God grant us the courage to follow in these days.

¹ M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled and Beyond*, pg. 73.