

Sermon  
February 10, 2019  
Epiphany 5C  
The Rev. Gary R. Brower, PhD

Isaiah 6.1-13  
Psalm 138  
I Corinthians 15.1-11  
Luke 5.1-11

My underlying question for this morning is “What if . . . ?”

Earlier this week I attended a gathering of the various priests-in-charge in the diocese. We have these meetings quarterly for the purposes of mutual support and, as happened this week, some “previews of coming attractions”. The “preview” that we had on Thursday was of the “U.S. Congregational Vitality Survey”, which all the parishes and missions in the diocese will be asked to administer in late March. The diocese has, for a number of reasons, been “given” this opportunity — no cost! It’s a robust survey, and will help congregations identify their strengths in several different areas: our “Overall Vitality”; how well we prepare people for, and engage in, mission within our congregation and outside our walls; do we prepare servant leaders; is our worship Spirit-filled; how well we care for each other, etc. The group behind the survey has done this before, and has a good solid academic and theological base for its work and conclusions. I was pretty excited to hear about it, as it will come out this spring, right when we’re in the midst of our “Season of Discovery.”

The survey will help us understand ourselves better. We will if there’s a difference between how the “people in the pew” see the church and how the leadership (clergy, staff, and vestry) sees the church. Since it’s all “strengths-based”, it should provide really good material for us as we begin to think about our vision moving forward. And, since all of the congregations in the diocese will be doing the same survey at the same time, we’ll have comparative data (should we want to see it). All of the congregational information together will, in addition, give the diocese a great snapshot of the vitality of the church as a whole in Colorado. As I said a minute ago, I was pretty excited to hear about it.

My enthusiasm, however, wasn’t universally shared. One priest-in-charge, in particular, said that he was going to play “devil’s advocate”, and proceeded, over and over again, to raise questions about the rationale for the survey, particular questions, etc. In other words, he spent a good long time, in many ways, asking “What if . . . ?” Some of his questions were pretty fair, but others seemed to be more than a bit nit-picky. Poor Ann Fleming, who, as you may know, is both our Transitional Ministry officer, as well as having charge over developing Congregational Development Training, did a great job graciously of fielding the “critiques”; she was able to keep her frustration much more under control (at least, so it appeared) than was I.

Now I like this colleague, but I didn't feel that his "devil's advocate" role (if that was what he was really doing) was getting us anywhere. It seemed to me that he wanted answers to every possible criticism/question; he wanted to know the precise GPS coordinates of the destination before starting on the journey. So, as gently as I could — well, maybe not — I spoke up and turned to our lessons for this Sunday. I pointed out that the story about Isaiah was not all tied up neatly in a bow. After the seraph burned away Isaiah's guilt and sin, God asked, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" (6.8). Isaiah's hand went up, "Oooh! Oooh! Pick me, pick me!" (6.9). Notice that Isaiah does not ask "What if . . .?" or "Where am I going?" or "What will I be doing?". He had had some idea I suppose; the first five chapters of the book recount a vision that Isaiah had about the situation in Israel. But God's instructions come **AFTER** Isaiah volunteered.

And then I turned to our reading from Luke's gospel. Jesus told Peter, after a long, unsuccessful, night of fishing, and after he had just cleaned the nets, to head out for another fishing trip. Jesus promised nothing; his instructions, however, were simple: "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch" (5.4). While Peter agrees to follow instructions, you have to wonder whether or not, in the back of his mind, he was saying: "I'm a fisherman; he's a carpenter. Why am I doing this?" "What if we don't catch anything? Will the trip have been worth it?" But he does it. And the catch is overwhelming. Jesus then glosses over Peter's confession of his sinfulness, and tells him "From now on, you'll be catching people." There's no real invitation or commission, no hint of what might come next. But the incident — and their knowledge of Jesus, and perhaps of his promise — was sufficiently transformative that Peter, James and John left their nets to follow Jesus . . . no end-game suggested.

My aim, of course, in recounting those two lessons, was to point out that trying to solve all of the problems in advance of using the survey could hinder us from setting forward. The survey would be a gift, regardless of specific questions; the devil was not so much in the details, but rather in the interpretation and delivery of the results. Several of the other clergy, as well as the "devil's advocate", were nodding as I spoke; one of them thanked me for the sermon idea — which of course, translated into **THIS** sermon!

It is human nature to balk — we've talked about this. And, yes, we can point to Jesus telling his followers at several points to "count the cost". But we can spend so much time doing that that the opportunities for making a difference pass us by. Procrastination, as we've probably heard, is as much a decision-making strategy as

anything else — by procrastinating, by continually asking “What if . . .?”, we let time make our decisions for us. And we may not like the outcome.

But God uses who we are, and takes us to the next level. God has an answer to our “What if . . .?” questions. Again, looking at Isaiah . . . if we take the structure of the book seriously, we see that the prophet was gifted with prophecy. As I noted earlier, the first five chapters of the book recount a vision that spoke to the situations facing Israel — Assyria was on the move; there was corruption at the highest levels, etc. He had a gift of insight and discernment. And then, at a critical moment — “in the year that King Uzziah died”, and the country was in transition, God had faith in those visionary, insightful skills, someone who saw things differently, who was capable of challenging his people, and raised up an amazing prophet. “What if” Isaiah hadn’t raised his hand, and said “Here am I, send me”?

Recall our Gospel lesson — a lot of it is about fishing. Now, many of you know that I am an angler, a fly-fisherman specifically. In the several years since I’ve been taken up that hobby, I’ve learned an incredible amount about what it takes to fool fish, what the different conditions of water (and weather) might mean, as well as how best to get flies unstuck from willow branches. As professional fishermen, Peter (as well as James and John ) knew a lot about how to “catch fish”. They knew about the right environments, the right times, the right means of catching, the need to take time to re-group and “clean their nets”. Jesus, the carpenter, had faith that those organizational and strategic skills in one arena could be valuable in achieving a quite different mission: “catching people”. “What if” Peter, James and John had said, “We can’t leave what we’re doing; find some carpenters to build your church”? Well, what we do know is that Jesus found a LOT of different skill sets to utilize, including tax-collectors and political/religious zealots!

So, consider Paul . . . We’ve talked a bit about him and his background in our discussion of Romans, but he spells it out in our passage from 1 Corinthians as well. We was a learned Jew, raised in a primarily Gentile area; he was very conversant in both cultures and languages. And, as we know from his own self-description, as well as that from others, that he was fervent in his persecution of the Christians. What an amazing set of skills — learned in Judaism, fluent in Gentile culture, a Roman citizen, and passionate — what an amazing set of skills that God could utilize to spread the message of Christ and his resurrection beyond the confines of Palestine. But, “What if” Paul said, “I may be blind now, but I can’t get on board with your vision, Lord.”

As I said earlier, it’s human nature to balk, to believe that we don’t have “the right stuff” to answer God’s call. We’re very good at asking “What if . . . I fail?” “What if . . . I make a mistake?” “What if people won’t take me seriously?” To all of these

“What if . . .?” questions, God responds, “What if . . . you trust me?” “What if . . . you recognize that you have gifts and skills that are useful for the building up of the body of Christ? What if you’re an attorney? We need clear thought! What if you’re a cook? We need to be fed! What if you’re an artist or musician? We need to be inspired! What if you’re a mystic? We need prayerful insight? What if you’re funny? We need to laugh! What if you’re a care-giver? We need a shoulder to lean on! What if you’re a carpenter? We need our building tended? What if you’re a scholar? A politician? We need those skill sets! What if you’re a fisherman? Well, we need those, too!”

The question God addressed to Isaiah (as well as, implicitly, to Peter and Paul): “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” is addressed to us as individuals, as well as to us as a congregation. Each of us has our skills, our charisms. I hope we’ve thought about those the last few weeks as we’ve hear the lessons from 1 Corinthians about our spiritual gifts. Good Shepherd has its gifts; I’ve talked about those over the last few weeks and months as well. My prayer for us is that we leave aside our tendency to ask “What if . . .?” as a devil’s advocate, and, instead, to ask, “What if . . . we trusted in God’s faith in us?”

What if . . . ?

Amen.