

'Get out of here!' Sermon first preached on February 7th 2010 by Dr Christine Hoffman @ FUMC Palmetto

I wonder what title you would give for the story we have just heard. What if Simon Peter were to give the story a title? How about: 'Gone fishin''? Poor Peter, he must have felt so reluctant to take Jesus' suggestion to let down the nets again. After all, Peter is the fisherman. Jesus is a carpenter. Yet, it is Jesus who enables this staggering catch of fish. You may remember Stephen telling the story the other week of the little girl who heard the story of Jesus turning the water into wine. What she learned from the story was: 'If you're having a party, be sure to invite Jesus.' This past week after Wednesday Bible Study, Erling Wittrock made a similar comment on this morning's story. A consummate fisherman, Erling made the suggestion that he would take advice from Jesus on how to fish. Of course, this story isn't so much about fishing-technique as about having faith and letting God work in unexpected ways. Through this incident, Peter comes to recognize more fully who Jesus is – Jesus, as the reflection of God. He senses not so much Jesus' miraculous power as Jesus' purity and holiness, reflecting God's purity and holiness. This brings to Peter an overwhelming sense of sin and unworthiness. I believe this story has much to teach us about our possible responses to the holy God. And I'd like to choose a different title to help focus our thoughts this morning. A good title for this story (and for that matter for the story of Isaiah's call that Stan/Wendy read) would be: 'Get out of here!' I believe we see in these stories, two responses that any of us can make when we sense the holiness of God. Here's the first response. We can be so overwhelmed by our own sinfulness that we withdraw from God's holy presence and demands. We can tell him, as Peter told Jesus, to get out of our space, out of our face, right away from us. 'Get out of here, God'. This was Isaiah's first response too. Here's the second response. We can be so inspired by this holy God and all that he can achieve in us that we listen when he says to us: 'Get out of here, man'.

I know that those of you who attended the last meeting of the Gory Group have recently been made to think of the immensity of God. Maggie Gruss shared with you and also with some of us who weren't able to be present on that occasion a DVD. The first part of the DVD centred on the vastness and detail of God's creation. It is not possible to put into words – hence, the need for such a visual representation, but against the other planets our earth was shown to be so tiny. We sometimes remember this when we say, in the famous song, 'It's a small world'. Generally, however, we feel the world, meaning the earth, is very big. As some of you may have seen, I recently completed an exercise on the social networking site, Face book. This exercise enables any member of face book to click on a map of the world, indicating which countries you have visited. Face book then calculates the number of countries. In my case, the number was 29. You would think from this that I must have visited quite a lot of the world. In fact, Face book calculated that these 29 countries together represented only 9% of the world. 9%! Is that all? Of course, the oceans constitute rather a lot of our planet. Even so, I'm struck at the very least by how much more I could visit. As Mary Shields replied on Face book, 'You better get on it!' This exercise reminded me how big our planet is. The earth is a very big world and, say the seraphim in our Isaiah passage, the whole earth is full of his glory'. And whose glory is that? If you look on the front of the bulletin, you see the

answer: it is God, the Lord of hosts. And what is this God like? The answer again is clear: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts'. I like this representation of the earth that features in Noni's choice for the cover of our bulletin this morning. Planet earth is depicted as heart shaped, for we know that this earth is loved of God. And not only the earth. As in the DVD Maggie shared, the entire universe, known and, as yet unknown to us, are beloved of God. So then how great is our God. He is greater than the entire cosmos. And holiness is part of this greatness.

It is this holiness of God that overwhelms the prophet Isaiah. 'Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory.' We recite these echoing words during our Communion Service. Indeed, in one form or another, in one language or another, they form part of the liturgy of many religious traditions. They are vitally important words in worship, stimulated to evoke adoration and awe in us. Some of you, I know, have your favorite music picked out for your funeral. (Bettie Wadsworth seems to have quite a list of pieces she wants sung). I have just one piece. It is probably not feasible for a funeral service, as it requires a substantial chorus and orchestra. But I hope I can hear this piece in my mind's ear, as it were, as I die. It is Bach's setting of these words in Latin, in his B Minor Mass: 'Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus, Dominus, Deus Sabaoth'. As on our bulletin: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts'. None of us can choose how we die, of course. Nor how we will finally enter fully into God's presence, but my hope would be that, whether, when the time comes, I can remember these words in Latin or in English, I can somehow hear this soaring music. Bach so magnificently captures the adoration of the seraphim in Isaiah and the adoration of any human being catching sight of the holy God whose glory fills the whole earth – and more. I hope I can have a sense of this holy God who says: 'Get out of here! Join me in my glory which is unimaginably great! Join me with the glorious company of apostles. Join me with the whole community of saints.' But my hope this morning is that not only I but also each one of you don't have to wait till the moment of death for this call to participate in God's kingdom. My hope is that, as we join in the Lord's Supper, we may be challenged anew by the holiness of Jesus; that we may hear his command: 'Do not be afraid'. My hope is that we will, like Isaiah and Peter, stand in the presence of someone who mediates the immediacy of God's presence, that this profound religious experience will put our life under a new spotlight and set in motion a commitment towards transformation.

Jesus calls us to discipleship, not as a burden but as an invitation. The willingness and the direction of our response are up to each one of us. When we are overwhelmed by our smallness –whether of mind, physical stature, or energy - we have a choice. We can turn in or we can turn out. When we are offered such a transformative moment, we can tell God to clear off and leave us alone or we can throw in our lot with him in his love for the world. We can stay in our box, or our familiar boat or we can go fishing with Jesus. This fishing will be in unbounded and unfamiliar seas. It will still be scary and we will often be tempted to return to our old boats and nets.

Through Jesus, God made a claim on the life of these early disciples, as earlier God made a claim on the life of Isaiah. Sensing this, they gladly heeded God's command: 'Get out of here'. And what about me and what about you? What will my faith, my discipleship

cost me this week, this month, this year? What will it cost me financially, physically, mentally, and emotionally? What will your faith, your discipleship cost you this week, this month, this year? Whatever this amounts to, is it an appropriate response to the holy God who sent his Son to be the model of costly discipleship?"

Follow me, says Jesus, leave behind this week one excuse you keep making for yourself for limiting your commitment; leave behind one attitude you keep displaying which you know shames you when Jesus shines his light on you; leave behind one fear that stops you from taking a risk in your discipleship. You cannot tell me which excuse, attitude, or fear I need to let go of in the coming days and I cannot tell you what excuse, attitude, or fear you need to let go of. But if, like Isaiah and Peter, we have any encounter with the holy God this morning, rest assured there will be some fresh response required of each of us.

As members of this church, as members of the worldwide church, we are partners in an incomprehensible mission. It is the mission of an unimaginably huge God. It is the mission of an inexpressibly holy God. We sadly are not holy and our world is not holy. But, we should be holy. We could be holy, at least in some measure. And we believe that God will accept our best efforts – yes, our best efforts. He will take them, bless them and in the process transform both ourselves and his gigantic world, tiny as the earth is in the cosmos. You may know this song I learned as a small child:

‘Jesus bids us shine with a clear, pure light
Like a little candle
Burning in the night
In this world of darkness
So let us shine
You in your small corner and I in mine.’

It really is not a small world, but a big one. But God is bigger still. There is no place where we can go where he is not already at work. The question is: will you and I be amongst those willing to catch up with him? In our committee meetings, our congregational meetings (ordinary and extraordinary), in our hymns, our prayers, our readings, our sermons, and most of all in our celebration of Holy Communion in this church, are we prepared to catch a glimpse of this holy God as seen in Jesus. Is each of us open and willing to hear God’s command to reexamine our protected ideas of what could constitute our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service? Are we ready to follow Isaiah, Simon Peter, and all the disciples we most admire and get out of here? In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.