

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany: Luke 5:1-11

The Rev. Brooks Cato

I grew up surrounded by bookshelves, and those bookshelves were full of tomes designed to look boring to an 8-year old. But there were some exceptions: the Bloom County comicstrip collections which, as it turned out, absolutely were not meant for an 8-year old; more Louis L'Amour novels than I could ever read but at least they had cowboys on the cover; and one book named after my birth year which just had to be a delight 'cause we shared something in common. That delightful book was *1984*. I don't think I even made it to the first "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU" before dropping it in favor of something more accessible. Sure, I'd end up reading *1984* several times later on, but I wasn't ready for it yet back then. And I probably still wasn't ready the first time I made it to the end. Actually, I wonder how many folks've picked up *1984* and not been ready to hear what Orwell had to say. Or heard it but didn't understand it. Or understood it but filed it away as fiction and therefore never possible. Anyway, for no reason, I thought of *1984* when I saw that reading from Isaiah, no reason at all.

See, the prophet tells God's people that destruction's coming at the hands of the Assyrian Empire. It's pretty much inevitable, but Isaiah still has to go out and tell everybody about it. But God tells Isaiah that the people'll keep listening and not hear, keep looking and not see. It'll get so bad that their eyes and ears might as well not work, and even if they do manage to see or hear something, they won't understand it. And because they won't understand it, the people can't make sense of it: "No way. I understand how the world works, and things like that just don't happen." But things like that do happen, and when they do, people're shockingly unprepared. And they're unprepared because they couldn't imagine their reality changing that drastically. And that's what Isaiah's up against.

As I've said with tongue firmly planted in cheek many times before, it's a shame the Bible isn't relevant. See, there's a line in *1984*: "The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command." Could've been written by Isaiah. The people will listen and not hear, look and not see. For a mighty long time, it seems like people've been walking around with eyes and ears wide open and not a thing going in. Or if something manages to squeak by, it's filtered through layers of preconceptions that rule what we do with all that input. I'm including myself in this. We've all got those lenses. It's like how your favorite sportsball team never does anything wrong but the other guys cheat every chance they get. Only, this isn't a game. We aren't staring down the tsunami of an empire crashing against the city gates, but what we've seen and heard the past few weeks points to another catastrophe. And when catastrophe's brewing, the world needs its prophets and it needs us to listen to 'em.

It's hard not to wonder about how we got here. You could argue it's not all that useful to wonder in the middle of the storm, but still, I wonder. I wonder if it comes down to desperation. Those fishermen Jesus picked up, they were not having a good time. They're out there fishing all day, wearing themselves out, tossing nets and pullin' 'em back in, and they had nothing to show for it. And fishermen with no fish are kinda useless. They're just men with nothing to sell for their livelihood, nothing to eat for their supper, nothing left to do but clean their nets and head home. And then someone who could draw a crowd to the water's edge and keep 'em there looked the fishermen's way. And he offered them what no one else had. He offered them another chance, full nets, and a day's catch of hope. And when they went along with him, they won so much their nets nearly broke, their boats nearly sank, and they had to call on each other for help dealing with all those blessings. It worked so well they quit their whole lives up 'til then and followed the fella with no idea what they were getting into. People are at their most easily persuaded when they're at their lowest, and those fisherfolk are

lucky the guy that came along and persuaded them was Jesus. He caught them on a bad day, showed them he could do what he said, and they were sold.

But it doesn't always play out like that. Some folks end up in situations so desperate that anyone who offers a way out, legitimate or not, gets real tempting. And if they see other folks helped along the way while they struggle -- even if that's not the truth of the situation -- if they even think it is, then the way out offered by a big personality looks even better, especially if that big personality offers you a leg up and those other folks a leg down at the same time. The lyrics from one of my favorite songs recognizes this so well it's almost prophetic, too: "Standing above the crowd, he had a voice that was strong and loud, and I swallowed his facade 'cause I'm so eager to identify with someone above the ground, someone who seemed to feel the same, someone prepared to lead the way, and someone who would die for me." ("Eulogy" by Tool) It doesn't even have to be true, you just have to believe it is. Now, I don't want to imply that today's fisherfolk are completely innocent 'cause they got taken advantage of, but maybe it's easier to understand knowing the power of someone above the crowd finally looking your way. That simple move was so powerful, it blocked their senses from the truth they can no longer see. This should also come as a warning. In Bible times, prophets were a dime a dozen. They were all over the place. Some were good at their job. Some were yes men. Some never got it right. And the only way to tell 'em apart? Y'all outta know this nugget by now: "You will know them by their fruits." Sometimes it was easy to tell, and sometimes it took time to know for sure.

Our nation's getting desperate. Groceries are still too expensive and the Constitution's becoming little more than a list of suggestions. We're desperate for change and fast. But we need to be careful where we put our trust. Big personalities are better positioned to sway us now than ever before. As we mirror the prophet asking "How long, O Lord, how long?" take care not to jump on the wrong bandwagon too soon. We need to fix this, but we need to do it right. Be careful. Be judicious. Be skeptical. And look for their fruits.

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Alright, that was my sermon, but I've got a completely different thing to talk about, and that's the elephant in the room, or the elephant that's about to be in the room. I mentioned this in our newsletter, Tidings, back in December, but it bears repeating. When I'm done up here, I'm gonna sit down and then we'll all stand up, and we'll all say the Nicene Creed, and then Susan over there's gonna lead the Prayers of the People. And in those prayers, you're gonna hear some names. Now, Rite I and some of the forms in Rite II use some names specifically. And those names are the people at the head of our government, especially the president and the governor. I know that's gonna make a lot of us uncomfortable. It should. But I wanna be clear: praying for someone is not an endorsement. It wasn't when it was Jimmy or either George, Ronald or Bill, Barack or Joe. It wasn't an endorsement of drone warfare or the War on Terror or CIA black sites. And today, it's still not an endorsement of Donald or Kathy or Guantanamo or ICE, either. I don't want y'all to be surprised, so here's what that prayer says: "We beseech thee also so to rule the hearts of those who bear the authority of government in this and every land that they may be led to wise decisions and right actions for the welfare and peace of the world." (BCP 329) I can't think of anything I want more right now. Wise decisions and right actions for the welfare and peace of the world. Y'all, that's what I long for every time I catch myself doom scrolling at 2 AM. Wise decisions and right actions are all I ask of those who bear the authority of government, and I will admit, I'm getting desperate for someone above the crowd to come along and offer us just that.

Folks, Jesus told us to do a lot of things but one thing he never said was "hate your enemy and definitely don't pray for 'em." Nope, in the Sermon on the Mount, he said, "Love your enemies and pray for them ... For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what

more are you doing than others?" (Luke 6) And maybe you don't think these names are your enemy -- pray for them also, but remember, it's not an endorsement. Either way, it's not an endorsement. Pray for them, pray for them to do better, and pray for them to do right.

To round us out, there's one more passage from scripture we're all gonna need to remember. Do with it what you will, but I'm gonna try to say it every morning 'cause God knows I'm gonna need it. It's from Romans:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another ... outdo one another in showing honour. ... Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ... extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty ... associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble ... live peaceably with all. ... If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink. ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:9-21)

When you can't trust your eyes and you can't trust your ears, when there seems to be no hope, pray. Pray for good. Pray for impossible change. And pray for love.