

Epiphany 5C Sermon 020710
Isaiah 6:1-8, [9-13]; Psalm 138
1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

In the name of the God whose death and resurrection made us – once and for all time – worthy.

In a recurring sketch from Saturday Night Live (long before they started making movies) Mike Myers and Dana Carvey played the characters of Wayne Campbell and Garth Algar – two post-adolescent slackers who loved rock-n-roll and “babes.” In one memorable appearance, the eternally popular rock band Aerosmith visited Wayne’s cable access television show (in Wayne’s parents’ basement). When the band came down the stairs, Wayne and Garth were amazed because such “rock gods” were there, and they fell down in the floor and began to bow at the feet of the Aerosmith front man, Steven Tyler, and repeat “we’re not worthy, we’re not worthy.” To which, Tyler responded, “Get up. You’re worthy.”

Now pop quiz. What do Moses, Isaiah, Simon Peter and the Apostle Paul have in common? Yes, you’re right. They *are* all people from the Bible. But maybe there is a little more to it than that. And yes, they were all called by God. That is another similarity. But just a little deeper, we discover that they were all called by God and said – at one time or another, in one way or another – that they were unworthy of their call. And then God showed them otherwise.

We all know the story of Moses. Out one day, tending his father-in-law's flock, he saw the now famous burning bush. When he went up to it, the voice of God came from it and told him to take off his sandals because he was on holy ground. But the Book of Exodus doesn't tell us that Moses took off his sandals. Instead, he hid his face because he was afraid to see God. Then when God told Moses what he was supposed to do, his response was "Who am I" to do such great deeds? And God had to turn Moses' staff into a snake and then back into a staff, just to get Moses to *start* following God.

In this morning's reading from Isaiah, the prophet had a vision in which he stood before the Holy throne of God. Isaiah told God that he was a man of unclean lips who lived among people of unclean lips. (Now I don't know about you, but I have my share of days and times in which I have unclean lips. Just try driving under the speed limit in front of me when I need to get to Beaumont to the hospital, or even a board meeting.) But the angel of the Lord came and purified Isaiah's lips and then sent him out to do God's work.

The Apostle Paul told the Church in Corinth, in the reading from this morning, "I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am." There was perhaps never anyone in the history of the Church who was more unclean than Paul. He led righteous, religious men in mobs to root out this new sect of people who followed Jesus, and to brand them as heretics and kill them. The first Christian martyr – Stephen – was stoned to death while

the man who later would become St. Paul held the coats of the men who hurled the rocks. But, “by the grace of God,” he became one of the chief architects of Christianity.

And this morning’s Gospel reading is the story of the calling of another one who is unclean and unworthy. Jesus needed to move away from the crowds that were pressing in on Him, so He asked Simon to take Him out a little way from the shore in his boat. The grizzled, uneducated and unrefined man was tired and frustrated after a fruitless night of fishing, but he reluctantly agreed. He took Jesus out a little way and Jesus taught the people, using the boat as a floating pulpit. When He finished, Jesus told Simon Peter to go deeper and put in the nets. The man who would become St. Peter initially whined about the request but relented. When his, and his partners’ boats were overflowing with fish, Peter fell at Jesus’ feet and told Him that he was unworthy to be with Jesus. But Jesus told him not to be afraid, because He was going to teach him to fish for people.

In the arc of the Biblical narrative, people have always been called by God. And those who have any sense at all have always felt like they were – to a greater or lesser extent – unworthy of their call. But in every case, God makes the people worthy of doing the work God has called them to do.

In just a minute we are going to gather around the baptismal font and recall God’s great deeds of power in freeing Moses and the Israelites from slavery in Egypt by leading them across the Red Sea. Then we will also recall Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan river. And that is where the arc of the story made a huge move.

Jayde Morgan is about to become the latest in a countless and unending line of people who will be washed in the waters of Christian baptism. In this rite of cleansing and initiation, she will become the next person to reap the benefit of the baptism, ministry, passion, death and ultimately the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

You see, when Jesus went down to death and then emerged into resurrection, He took all of our sin – our unclean-ness – and He cleansed it all. Unlike Moses, Gideon, Isaiah, Paul and Simon Peter, we don't necessarily get visions, voices or eye-popping miracles. Instead, we get Jesus – and that is infinitely better.

In the next few minutes – if you look closely and keep your ears open – you're going to see and hear a couple of small but spectacular miracles that are designed, among other things, to show you that you are worthy of God's call in your life.

First, we are going to be witnesses as God transforms ordinary water and oil into the sacraments of repentance and rebirth. We will go down into the waters of baptism with Jayde. We will witness God taking her through the waters into the new life of a Christian. And we will watch as Holy Oil seals her and marks her as Christ's own lamb, a full-fledged member of the flock ... for eternity.

Then we will gather around the altar and be part of the second miracle, in which God will take regular bread and wine and through the immeasurable power of the Holy Spirit, transform them for us into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ – the food and drink of unending life as Christians.

The water of baptism; the oil of sealing; the Body and Blood of our Lord; they are all given to us here today as sacraments – and remember the definition of “sacrament” (an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace) – these outward and visible signs are given to us as proof of our worthiness to stand before the throne of God as living members of the Body of Christ.

We may not be able to throw sticks down on the ground and have them turn into snakes, like Moses did. I hope that God never literally cleanses my lips with a hot coal, like Isaiah had happen. I’ve never been struck blind and then regained my sight, like the Apostle Paul, nor had a huge catch of fish out of nowhere, like Peter did. But every week I’m fed with the Body and Blood of Christ – and some days I get to participate when a child or an adult is washed and sealed in baptism. And that’s enough to ready me for work.

Jesus made us worthy. Now, like all those whose stories we know, we too are called to do God’s work. Come and be cleansed once more, then eat and drink and be fortified for the journey. You are worthy. Thanks be to God and Christ Jesus in the power of the Spirit. Amen.