

It's about God: Isaiah 6:1-8; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

Sunday's Coming Premium

January 23, 2007

Last fall a friend of mine attended a lecture at the University of Mississippi delivered by Stanley Hauerwas. His talk was followed by an invigorating, hour-long question-and-answer dialogue. My friend reported that afterward he and some students, another minister and several laypeople went to someone's house and talked about God for another hour or so. They didn't talk about Hauerwas or Will Campbell, both of whom are interesting conversation subjects. They didn't discuss ethics or books or engage in church shoptalk. They talked about God.

How novel. It made me wonder—how many of my people go home and talk about God after they've heard one of my sermons on a Sunday? I know they talk about my delivery, who was in church and who was missing, what hymns we sang, and whether what I had to say was interesting or not. But do they talk about God?

Our texts have much in common with each other. Isaiah meets God face-to-face in the temple, realizes his own unworthiness and answers God's call to service. While writing to the Christians in Corinth and reminding them that Christ died, was resurrected and was seen by several witnesses after his resurrection, Paul mentions that the resurrected Christ had appeared to him, "one untimely born," "for I am the least of the apostles."

In Luke, Peter encounters Jesus after Jesus shows him and two other fishermen how to dip down in deep water and catch so many fish that the boats begin to sink. Peter falls down at Jesus' knees and confesses his own sinfulness, then is called to follow Jesus and become a catcher of people. All three—Peter, James and John—meet God, are humbled and respond to the call to serve. For all three, the God we Christians know in Jesus is central.

A friend of mine asked me, "I've been thinking about coming to your church. Do you talk about Jesus and Christ and God and all that?" I laughed. "Well, yes, we try to talk about Jesus as often as possible." Then, more seriously, I added: "You know, he is central to everything we're about." She hasn't shown up yet.

That encounter reminds me of a colleague who was interviewed by a pastor search team from a liberal northeastern congregation. The committee chair asked her, "Do you use the 'J' word very often?" She wondered what the "J" word was (Jerk? Justice? Jehoshaphat?). "Well, you know, do you talk about Jesus often?" Somewhat surprised by the question, she ventured that yes, she did talk about Jesus whenever she could work him into the conversation. They were not amused and she didn't get the call.

What is it that makes us reluctant to talk about God, Jesus and "all that"? And if it is hard to talk about God, how much harder to actually encounter God? Prayer can be hard work, painful work, deep work. So is worship. God is not for those content to paddle around in the shallow end. Jesus Christ calls us out into the deep, where we come face to face with who God is and who we aren't. As an old rancher church member told me, "I'd rather be whipped with a wet rope than have to face up to my own sin every Sunday."

For those of us called to help people know and worship God in Christ, it doesn't take long before we realize that not everyone falls down and cries, "Get away from me! I'm a sinful person!" when we walk into the room. Some folks get downright hostile, like the parent who started yelling at me when I went over to see her son when I was a 20-year-old youth minister. A week later she called and apologized and explained that her anger had something to do with her own turmoil with God, but for the next several years I bent over backward trying to be a minister who didn't dress like a minister, look like a minister or talk like a minister, which meant that I didn't talk much about God. For most people I met, whether I liked it or not or whether they liked it or not, I represented God, and it took me a long time to come to terms with that.

A further complication in my part of the world, the Bible Belt, is that there is a common assumption that the pervasive God-talk is actual talk of God. Often it isn't. Much of the time God-talk is religious and political talk. Some speak of God and the Lord Jesus with a casualness that makes one wonder if the Lord Jesus is the same one before whom Peter fell down. Most of the conversations around here are full of the Bible, "our country," George Bush and the Ten Commandments. There is none of Peter's humility.

In the midst of all of this, our call is to keep talking of God, pointing to Jesus Christ with humble lives of service, and trusting the rest to the Spirit. Every once in a while we are encouraged. Several years ago, an ornery civil rights attorney, known to

make East Texas county sheriffs sweat with fear, heard my name in conversation and said, "That preacher scares me and his church scares me." The other person said, "Scared? You? Why?" "Because they remind me of God," he said.

About three or four years later he promised his dying father that he would return to church, and he hasn't missed a Sunday since, sitting with his wife on the second row. One day, while eating lunch with a group of attorneys, he said something uncommonly gentle to an overworked waitress. One of the attorneys remarked, "What's gotten into you?" He said, "I'm a Christian now."