

“Remember When”

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Isaiah 6:1, 5-8 + Luke 5:4-11 = call and vocation

Many years ago at a formal dinner party, the hosts asked a question to stimulate conversation: “Do you remember when you encountered your first Volkswagen Beetle?” Incredibly, almost everyone present had not only encountered but had owned a VW bug at one time or another. My family has owned three over the years.



Given the common stories shared by so many at that dinner of the exact same maintenance nightmares, by all accounts there is actually only one VW bug in all of existence. It just keeps being rebuilt, repainted and resold to another owner.



I remember vividly the first VW I ever saw in Fort Worth in 1958. They were extremely rare in those days. That strange, funny car like no other was a weathered yucca which may have once actually been yellow. It was unforgettable. It belonged to my first grade teacher, Miss Abbott. I contrived some excuse to stay after school so she would have to give me a ride home.



That same year was a banner year for firsts. “Do you remember when you tasted your first Dr. Pepper?” I do remember. At Miss Abbott’s end of year picnic: we were down on the Trinity River Bottom in a stand of Cottonwoods.



I reached into the cooler and pulled out this strangely labelled bottle. I opened it and the taste was like nothing I had ever tasted before.





As I possibly imagined it, the sky opened up with a rainbow. It was unforgettable. Dr. Pepper.

You might think I had a crush on Miss Abbott, but I believe it was really the Dr. Pepper ~ and the Volkswagen.

“Do you remember when you heard this story of Jesus commanding the disciples to fish on the other side?”



I do. Again that same banner year, the first time being in big people’s church was unforgettable. Before the day of children’s sermons, I still remember every aspect of it. I was five going on six, living with my maternal grandmother, ~ a stern matriarch of a woman who, despite that severe exterior, never could quite hide her love and affection for the two rowdy grandsons in her care.



Grandmother Pratt set me down and explained in her matter-of-fact way that now that I was almost six, I had the unadulterated privilege of attending worship. I wasn’t to wiggle or squirm or talk or color or draw ~ I was to listen.

You would have thought I had been sentenced to purgatory. What had I done to deserve this? With the same fear and trembling as Isaiah described, I entered God’s temple for the first time.

Ron Hubbard was pastor at that time. I have an extraordinarily vivid memory of him in the pulpit that day. The Holy of Holies could not have been more powerfully, frighteningly fascinating for Isaiah.



The light from the rose window came streaming down over his left shoulder, spotlighting him and the pulpit in stark contrast with the darkened sanctuary. A voice like drawn steel which could keep even the wandering attention of a bouncy six-year-old unaccustomed to church.



Expository preaching may be dead, but Ron Hubbard practiced it in spades. Vividly, dramatically, he drew out the story of Jesus commanding the disciples to draw their nets to the other side. When Simon tried to lift up the overflowing nets, Rev.

Hubbard's hand reached over the side of the pulpit. He pulled against the imagined net. You could see the strain and you could feel the overstraining nets just begin to snap. Vivid enough, dramatic enough so that even an almost six-year-old could comprehend it completely.

In the hands of a master storyteller, the power of the Word to grasp us, to hold us, to challenge us is still compelling.

“Where were you, when you first heard this story?”

But even more: “Where were you when it first really sank in?”

I heard it first in that sanctuary so many years ago. But I really grasped the story ~ and was grasped, grabbed and held by it ~ decades later in Indonesia. First time I really came in contact with persons who made their living and livelihood by fishing with nets. In Indonesia today, as it was on Lake Gennesaret in the disciples' day, fishing is mind-numbing and body-straining work with disappointing results and extraordinarily low return on one's labor.



In Indonesia, many were former political prisoners who as outcasts could inhabit only the lowest rung on the economic food chain. The women who wove the nets would earn about 2½ cents for two full day's labor ~ not even enough to buy a small bowl of rice. Most nights and days were like Peter's:

“Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing.”

One day I met a fisherman going home. I asked to see his catch for the day. He pulled out three small fish, not much bigger than minnows. Inexplicably to me, he smiled like he had caught a whale. He said it was a pretty good day. It was, it is desperate work.

Imagine then Simon Peter. Peter was not a successful businessman. He was a peasant fisherman, broken by work, bone-weary, mind-numbed; and yet when Jesus requested, Peter raised his weary self and yet one more one more time cast the nets.



Imagine then his surprise, the joy turned

to fear, as the enormous haul threatened to capsize the boat. Peter accustomed to a few small fish from a night's work must have been dumbfounded, completely confounded by this windfall.

Jesus ends this encounter:

“Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.”

Isaiah 6, Isaiah's encounter with God in the temple, as distant and different as it seems, is yet the same story as Peter's unforgettable encounter with Jesus: both stories of God's call. Both form the same pattern of repentance and response; both compelling experiences of the fearful and fascinating power of God.



When God called him, Isaiah stood upright and in a clear voice,

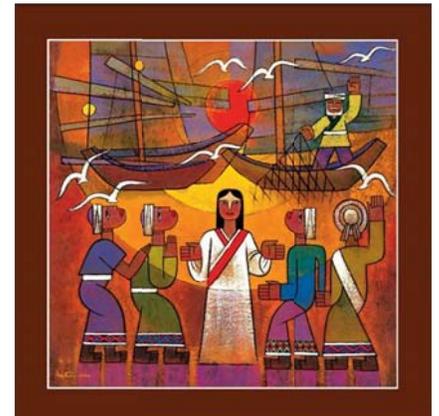
“Here I am, send me.”

When Jesus called Peter, James and John, the Bible records:

“They left everything and followed Jesus.”

“Do you remember.....when you were first called out by God?” When you first heard that persistent voice of God calling, cajoling, commanding, compelling.

Old familiar texts ~ perhaps overly familiar. As Fred Craddock says, we can “overhear the Gospel,” that is, we can miss the meaning because we've heard it so many times to the point of not hearing any more.



So remember back to that first unforgettable time.

Remember the awe and wonder and fear on hearing for the first time Isaiah's fear and trembling in the temple. Remember the awe and skepticism with which you greeted your first reading of the miraculous harvest of fish.

Remember so you can re-appropriate that powerful, compelling, lost sense of wonder at the Word.

As Jesus called the disciples to fish for persons, as God called Isaiah to prophesy,

- Remember then the very first time you heard each of these narratives.
- Remember then your own calling.
- Remember then your personal vocation.
- Remember whose you are, who claims you and who redeems you.