

Fifth Sunday in Epiphany; Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11
The Rev. Devon Anderson
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James Vukelich is Turtle Clan and a descendent of Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwe. Every day he posts an “Ojibwe Word of the Day” on Facebook. And every Thursday night, Vukelich offers the Ojibwe word of the day live, giving an extended explanation of the word’s meaning in Ojibwe cultural and religious practices. This past Thursday the live Word of the Day was: *Wibinige-giizis* (Whey-ben-ah-gay Gee-zus), meaning: The Throw Away Moon, the Ojibwe word for the month of February. A month of time, in Ojibwe, is called a moon. And each month or moon is named for something important that happens in the community at that time of year. Vukelich was told an origin story about where this month’s name comes from by a Mille Lacs Ojibwe elder who told him that at this time of year, as the February moon is waxing, growing into a full moon, Anishinabeg have a tradition of taking a stick – from any tree but most commonly from a Red Willow -- and tying at the end of the stick some tobacco, secured with cloth or a piece of leather. Once the tobacco is firmly attached, the person goes out into the woods and throws the stick as hard as they can, and as they are throwing yells, “I throw away my illness,” or “I’m throwing away my sickness.” *Webinige* (Whey-ben-ah-gay) means “to throw,” and *Giizis* (gee-us) means “moon,” thus, February is the time of year to throw away, to purge, any illness or sickness, *Webinige Giizis*: the month of the Throwing Away Moon.

This ritual is comparable to a New Year’s resolution, explains Vukelich. It is an annual ritual where a person takes stock of their lives and asks themselves, “What are the things that are keeping me from living a good life?” “What is causing me harm?” “What is weighing me down?” Those things that prevent the good life, or cause pain or weigh a person down – those things are known to be a person’s “illness” or “sickness.” The sickness can be anything: physical ailments, anger, depression, sadness, anxiety, addiction – physical or mental or psychological or situational. It’s a cleansing of sorts, a taking stock, where a person lifts up what is holding them back, tying them down, and gives their illness to the Moon, who, Vukelich says, “accepts whatever you’re giving her and sets you free.”

What is common in all three of our scripture readings this morning – from Isaiah, from the Epistle, from Luke - is a particular kind of “illness” or “sickness” that holds a person back from the good life, from a life lived in the fullness of God, that prevents redemption and wholeness, happiness and purpose. And, in each case, a kind of healing occurs, a dispelling of the illness, a restoration of connection, an unbinding of what holds them back. We hear from the prophet Isaiah, speaking in the midst of great political unrest and uncertainty. The king is dead, and the kingdom of Judah is vulnerable and scared as their enemies lick their lips and press in from all sides. Now is the time for the Judeans to come together, now is the time for courage, now is the time to step forward. But Isaiah is paralyzed with “illness” – which, in his case, is his self-doubt and sense of unworthiness and limitless flaws. “Woe is me!” he cries, “I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips...” To which there is, in response to his cries, a healing - as a seraph

touches Isaiah's lips with a live coal – unbinds him and sets him free. “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” asks the Lord. “Here I am; send me!” exclaims the emancipated prophet.

In his letter to the people of Corinth, Paul recounts his particular “illness” – “I am the least of the apostles,” he writes, “unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” And then there's God's grace, left vague by Paul in his letter, yet palpable and strong enough to lift Paul out of his sense of unworthiness, powerful enough to rid him of his guilt for all of the terrible things he's done to hurt other people. God accepts Paul's hurt, his anxiety and fear, and somehow takes it off Paul's shoulders, setting him free to get about his work - to spread the Good News and the story of Jesus throughout the world.

And then, we read in Luke about Simon Peter who watches Jesus standing just off shore in Simon's boat, who listens to Jesus' inspiring teaching, and then witnesses the miracle of fish spilling from his nets where there were none just moments before. “Go away from me, Lord,” he tells Jesus, “for I am a sinful man.” I'm flawed. I'm not worthy of what you're giving. You don't want me. Maybe there was healing for Simon Peter in Jesus' teaching. Maybe the healing came as he witnessed the miracle of the fish. Or maybe the healing arrived on the wings of Jesus' invitation: there's nothing to second-guess or fear, Simon Peter. I want you with me. Follow me. Join me. You are more than enough. Whatever healed Simon Peter's particular brand of “illness,” in his encounter with Jesus it fell away, and Simon Peter was free. So he dropped his nets and gave his life to the living God. He gave it all: forever and a day.

Lost, unclean, guilty, unfit, sinful, unworthy. Isaiah. Paul. Simon Peter. All stories about God's sufficiency and human insufficiency or, said in a different way, how God's grace shines most brightly in those situations in which we feel the most powerless, or better yet, the most inadequate. How God is never deterred by human frailties. How being lost or unclean or guilty or unfit or sinful or unworthy never seems to matter in the least to God.

It's interesting that these three stories – which span about 1000 years of time – focus in on the same message, almost formulaic. I guess one could make the claim that that singular idea is also the theme of almost every story in the Bible. Have you ever noticed that there are no real heroes in the Bible? I'm talking about fairytale or mythical heroes – men and women who have such purity of heart and deep virtue that even though they are faced with trials and temptations, in the end they triumph because of their purity of heart and deep virtue. In my mind, there just aren't those kinds of heroes in the Bible. It is, from beginning to end, a story of God working through, and sometimes in spite of, the most imperfect people: people who sometimes act in less-than-noble ways (to say the least), whose virtue is unsteady, whose purity is stained. Our holy scriptures, time and again, tell the story of God's grace overcoming human weakness. They tell the story about the God who, as Isaiah would later proclaim, “gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.” “Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,” Isaiah says, “They shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

Isaiah's later words of comfort and proclamation were written to the exiles of Israel as they crouched, weeping, by the rivers of Babylon over twenty-six centuries ago, after the king fell and their enemies did swoop down, burn their lives to the ground, and cast the people Israel back out into the wilderness. The exiles were soundly defeated. They felt powerless and sinful. They knew

they'd messed up in all sorts of ways. They had confronted the dark places in their own hearts; they'd taken stock of their failures. Some of them thought they'd only received what they deserved, and some thought they'd suffered more than what was really warranted or understandable. All of them, Isaiah tells us, felt helpless, incapable of changing their situation by their own efforts. And into this misery came a powerful word of hope and strength, the ancient invitation to trust in God, to put their confidence in someone other than themselves, in a power greater than their own. And doing that meant admitting, flat out, their own insufficiency while realizing that God was not going to take that as an excuse for not getting on with the job that had to be done – in their case, getting themselves back to Jerusalem to rebuild the community anew.

In the past 10 years or so there's been a resurgence in the writings of the "desert fathers and mothers." These were spiritual pioneers in the fourth and fifth centuries who left Jerusalem to go back into the wilderness of the Egyptian desert and build monasteries. They left behind volumes of writing about their experiences in monastic life, full of easily quoted sayings, and story upon story that read a bit like Zen Koans or Jesus' parables – seemingly simplistic interactions between an abbot and monk that pack a big lesson.

Here's an example: it was said concerning Abba Agathon that some monks came to find him, having heard tell of his great discernment. Wanting to see if he would lose his temper, they said to him, "Aren't you that Agathon who is said to be a proud man?" "Yes, it is very true," he answered. They resumed, "Aren't you that Agathon who is always talking nonsense?" "I am." Again they said, "Aren't you Agathon the heretic?" But at that, he replied, "I am not a heretic." So they asked him, "Tell us why you accepted everything we cast you, but repudiated this last insult." He replied, "The first accusations I take to myself, for that is good for my soul. But heresy is separation from God. Now I have no wish to be separated from God." At this saying they were astonished at his discernment and returned, edified.

If you're like me you may be surprised, then delighted and relieved to find that stories from the early monastics – these *very holy people* – reveal struggles with the same things with which we struggle today, namely, the dead places in their own souls, petty jealousies, thoughts of revenge, self-pity, insecurity, and plain old fashioned cowardice. Taken together, I think the desert stories comprise a kind of "spirituality of imperfection." Far from being flawless icons of the faith, the desert monastics too were vulnerable to ambition, self-deception, self-justification, rudeness, mood swings, impulsivity, possessiveness, laziness, and depression. Heck, they left behind stories about misbehaving in church, and even falling asleep during the sermon! Yet these flawed, contorted, imperfect people are our spiritual forebears, the people who have gone ahead of us to show us pathways to God. Deep in their theology is certainty that a quest for perfection is the enemy of spirituality, or, as Anne Lamott writes, "Perfection is the voice of the oppressor."

To me theirs is a comforting and hopeful theology, because to one degree or another, every single one of us lives with the steely boot of expectation pressed up against our necks. And if that weren't enough, there is the shame that comes with it as we, privately, survey how completely and consistently we come up short next to the measuring stick of perfection. Our ideal is to have it all – beauty, talent, success, exceptional parenting skills as reflected in our incredibly perfect crisis-free children, thinness, fitness, and finance. Here's a newsflash: it's a losing battle.

But that's what's cool about the writings of the desert monastics. For all of their self-awareness about their imperfections, still, they were not overcome. Living under the full weight of their impurity, they were not neutralized or stymied or closed down. And they refused to hide behind their frailties, excusing themselves from doing the work God had given them to do. For somewhere in their religious practice, in their relationships with each other, in their ultimate trust in a God who had proven time and again, century after century, the ability to work through fractured and pained people, the desert monastics were able to leave behind their own limitations and go about doing God's work in the world. They got about learning patience and tenderness and forgiveness with each other and chose not to compare themselves with others or be overly anxious about their progress. Because in the end these forbears, these spiritual heroes were not after personal perfection – they were after God, and the experience of God's grace.

Have we not known? Have we not heard? Every single Sunday in the breaking of the bread and in the prayers, in every conceivable story in the Bible, in the words of our spiritual ancestors, we are reminded that God does – and always has done – God's best work through flawed, compromised, ashamed, weary people. Our imperfections and shortcomings can't hold a candle to the power of God's grace. When it comes to the community of faith, no perfect people need apply, only real human beings who are ready to be someone God can work with. Remember that God accepts, with joy, our faithful efforts, however much we may stumble and fall, as long as we are willing to get back up and start lurching forward again, our eyes and ears and hearts open to what God might be trying to do in us and through us, modern day heroes of the faith. AMEN.

Sources:

No Perfect People May Apply, by Lisa Kenkeremath.
Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume One, pp. 314-319.

James Vukelich's "Throwing Away Moon" Ojibwe word of the day:
<https://www.facebook.com/james.vukelich.7>