“***Woe Is me***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Feb. 23, 2025

**Isaiah 6:1–8**

1In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a high throne; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. 2Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. 3And they called to each other: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory. . .” 5And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips. . . !”

6 Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 7The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” 8Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

**Luke 5:1–10**

14Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, 2he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. 3He got into the boat belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. 4When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” 5Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so . . .” 6And they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. . . 8Simon Peter fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” . . . 10Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.”

You know how important respect is in human relations, right? It builds up young people, it encourages adults, and it comforts senior citizens. Respect is essential to building our relationships and then our community. Respect allows us to have civil conversations: we can agree to disagree and still work together, if we appreciate each other’s ideals. There’s a particular kind of respect shown in our biblical stories today. It is respect for God. In both the Isaiah story and the Luke story, someone abases himself in the face of divinity and says he is sinful and unworthy, and in both cases he is encouraged and told that he will be given a mission.

The statement of self-abasement—the “woe is me”—seems to be evidence of the proper humility, respect, and reverence by the person in question. Such humility would then qualify him to become one sent by God with a message. We know that both Isaiah and Peter become energetic and effective preachers, and they both retain a certain humility at the base of their character.

So should we also be saying “woe is me” and “I am a sinful man” all the time? I don’t think so. We shouldn’t *dwell* in that place. Rather, in both of our stories, this was the appropriate response to a surprising encounter with divinity. It was a proper and worthy expression of humility. But self-abasement is not a place where we should always remain.

Respect is appropriate, but self-abasement can be harmful. The seraph, an angel, tells Isaiah his sin is blotted out; so Isaiah should not obsess over his inherent sinfulness. And Jesus tells Peter not to be afraid. He should stand up and have a normal demeanor, not be bowed down and self-deprecating. He should be fearless, and dedicated to serving others.

So, these stories show us how God wants to lift us up, to make us feel free of sin, to help us be unafraid. We reach out to God, but God first reached out to us. Moses also told God that he, Moses, was unworthy and was nothing special. God then replied that he, God, would be with him, and people would realize that God was leading him (Exod 3:12).

Isaiah, Peter, and Moses all thought they were nothing special, not worthy to carry God’s message, but God thought they were good enough, and empowered each one of them! Moses founded a whole nation and gave them their religious teaching. Isaiah comforted a whole nation during a time of crisis, and promised God would protect them, which he did. Peter led the way in the proclamation of a gospel that would eventually conquer half the world, and which isn’t done yet. God can turn ordinary people into extraordinary leaders. God brings out the best in us. God knows we have amazing potential qualities and loves to see us develop them and to grow in love.

So, what about people who are never going to be a Moses or a Peter? Can God also use ordinary people, and make them have an effect greater than they can imagine? Yes, I think so. You might be a sort of representative of Christ to your relatives and friends. When they think of Jesus, they might also think of you, saying, “I know somebody who’s very dedicated to Jesus. She seems to have a good attitude toward life, and is somebody I would want to rely on if I needed help.” They might even say, “if so-and-so is so sure about God, maybe she’s right; maybe there *is* a God who loves us. Maybe there is more to life than just the material level.” I’m saying that you might be more of a representative of Jesus than you realize. Your initial reaction might be “I am a sinful man,” or “I am nothing special,” but God might beg to differ. Maybe you are already a fisher of people; maybe God has already sent you to a group of your friends and relatives.

If you’re fishing all on your own, you might not catch anything. But if God is with you, you might draw in a huge catch. Now what is this “God is with you” business? How can we know if God is with us? I think we can only test that out through experience. You will probably be surprised when someone says “you know, what you said about God really effected me. I didn’t realize your words would stick with me that way.” Or they might say, “I really appreciated it when you visited me in the hospital. It lifted my spirit.” Or they might say “your faith is much stronger than mine. But it inspires *me* to have some faith, too.” That which is a bright light in *your* life might be a beacon of hope and light to someone else, offering the promise of a better life. Share *your* light with others. You are unique. There is no other like you.

You are an ambassador of God in your circle. You can tell of the love of Jesus. Be not afraid. God will go with you, today and always.