



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Epiphany 5 Year C

#### Trusting Jesus

[RCL]: Isaiah 6:1-8, [9-13]; Psalm 138; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

From September of 2003 through April of 2005, the television show *Joan of Arcadia* introduced viewers to a teenage girl named Joan, but with a twist: Joan's character is loosely based on the life of the 15<sup>th</sup>-century saint, Joan of Arc. The overarching plot showed Joan Girardi as a modern 16-year old girl who is visited by God in various forms, such as a garbage man, a dog walker, a little girl, a teenage punk rocker, and other unexpected people. God continually asks Joan to do things that seem strange at the time, but work themselves out in transformational ways within Joan's character and the lives that she touches.

In one episode, God, in the form of a cute teenage boy, tells Joan that he wants her to do something that scares her. As soon as he tells her this, he turns around and walks down the school hallway, leaving Joan alone with a million questions. She is afraid of so many things, how is she supposed to know which one to pick?

Responding to God's request to do something that scares us is exactly that: scary. However, what God asks of us is not usually some one-off event like in a dangerous reality TV show. Instead, it is fear of change on a more personal level—a change of will, an attitude of openness to change one's heart, a change of perception toward another. In many cases, people would rather have a 40-foot wave of water come down on them or be shot up into the sky without a parachute than make such a change. But if we stop for a moment and breathe, we notice that deep down inside—sometimes not until afterward—what God is asking of us is the right thing to do. When Joan of Arcadia would fulfill what God asked of her in each episode, it always made her grow as a person and brought her closer to others. Such things are usually signs that we have done or are doing the right thing in answering God's call.

Fear is paralyzing, though. It motivates us to maintain the *status quo* and to resist growing into who God is calling us to be. Fear is what made Saul of Tarsus, who would later become the apostle Paul, persecute Christians. Fear is what makes us believe we are not worthy of being loved—by others, by ourselves, and by God. Fear casts out reason. Fear lacks God's imagination of wonder for the future. We can certainly imagine any number of horrible things that might happen, but it is more difficult to visualize something

entirely new. Fear tells us it will keep us safe, but it does not tell the whole story. It also traps us and makes us unable to experience the freedom of what Jesus offers.

Yet, this is where God finds us. Just like Jesus found Simon Peter in his boat and Paul on the road to Damascus, God comes to where we are and asks us to do something that seems unthinkable, laughable, bizarre, or just plain scary. There's a line from the movie *Junebug* where Amy Adams' character says to her not-so-great husband, "God loves you just the way you are, but he loves you too much to let you stay that way." We could stay the same, but it would go against our Baptismal Covenant and against the transforming power of living a life of faith by following Jesus. With Jesus meeting us where we are, we have a wonderful opportunity to experience God's grace. We do not have to be perfect in order for God to want to be in relationship with us. We just have to be willing to drop our own baggage around our fears and follow, like Peter, James, and John did when they brought their boats, overflowing with fish, to shore.

It sounds so simple to follow Jesus, doesn't it? It should be compelling to hear about his miracles in scripture and witness that the work of God is full of abundance and grace in our own lives—so compelling that we want to leave everything and follow Jesus, too. Jesus tells Peter, James, and John that they should not be afraid of what has happened and that from then on, they would be catching people, too, just as Jesus has caught them—by being with them where they were and exemplifying the blessing and abundance of God. In leaving everything and following Jesus, they immediately reorder their entire lives, with Jesus at the center of every decision they make.

What would that be like for us? In the business world, there are a lot of core value exercises that help people discern what is important to them and how they can work better and more effectively by being aligned with their personal and company values. This is usually done by using a pre-made list or having the group write out what they believe are important and then narrowing the list down to five or perhaps three top values. Then, when they are making major decisions about the direction of the company or their lives, they ask if the outcome would support their chosen core values. If the outcome does not, then they revise their plan so that it does. This type of winnowing down of values so that clarity emerges can be extremely useful in moving a company or a life forward with purpose and energy.

What if we applied this type of order to our Christian life? What if, like those first disciples and Paul, Jesus was at the center of every decision we made? It is not just asking ourselves what Jesus would do, but more deeply and pointedly, what would Jesus have *me* do? Perhaps the list of values we would use come from the Baptismal Covenant or the fruits of the spirit, values such as seeking to serve Christ in all persons, faithfulness, proclaiming by word and example the Good News of God in Jesus Christ, embodying gentleness, living in peace, or administering self-control. Would our lives be different if we did this? Would our world?

To be called by God to follow Jesus takes more than just a willingness of heart and living through our core Christian values. It takes the humble response that we repeat every time we recite our Baptismal Covenant: *I will, with God's help*. We have the will, but God is the way. We must actively choose to follow Jesus and we

need God's help to do so, as that road is unknown and will present us with challenges and joys which we are unable to predict.

In our modern time, we have control over a great many things in our lives and therefore perceive that we can control everything, including other people and events. When we come up against uncontrollable circumstances, we are often at a loss. In a difficult circumstance, people may tell us platitudes such as "Let go and let God," or "There's a reason for everything." Although the person means well, these sayings are not helpful when facing a life-altering event. Or, we may be going along, happy with our daily lives like Peter, when suddenly we experience a miracle—something unexpected and uncontrolled. Something that we did not order from the menu of what we thought was our life.

Regardless if it is a positive or negative circumstance that comes up, we are challenged to respond faithfully, knowing that Jesus is getting into the boat with us, no matter what. No matter if we deserve it or not, no matter how great our fear or joy is, Jesus meets us where we are and this is why we grasp his outstretched hand—unexpected, full of grace, in invitation—and we follow. Amen.

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