

Isaiah 6:1-8 & Luke 5:1-11 – February 6, 2022

Have you ever experienced an answer to prayer? I think many, if not most, Christians could say they have. It's something that, as people of faith, we are excited to see happen.

Maybe it was the near miraculous – or completely miraculous – healing of someone you love. Cancer that went into remission. Recovery from a devastating stroke. Leaving the hospital after nearly dying from an infection.

Maybe it was a financial blessing. Gainful employment after years of searching. A sudden gift when bankruptcy seemed imminent. A family-business turning a profit just when the doors were about to be shut.

Maybe it was a personal blessing. Reconciliation with a long lost family member. Restoration of a friendship that you had thought was beyond repair. The end of a hostile work environment and a return to peace.

These examples I just gave you aren't hypothetical. They are actual examples of prayers that I have seen answered in the lives of my parishioners over the past 12 ½ years of ministry.

It's gotten to the point where, if you come to me and tell me about an answered prayer and I don't seem to give you much of a reaction, it's just because I see it a lot. People like coming to me to tell me about their answered prayers and I love hearing about them. But I'm not going to be shocked. Because... yeah, God answers prayer.

When we look at the ministry of Jesus in the Gospels, we are very much seeing the answer to prayer for a lot of people. When Jesus heals Simon Peter's mother-in-law, it's an answer to prayer. When Jesus casts out a demon that has been afflicting a man horribly, it's an answer to prayer. When Jesus causes the paralyzed to walk and the lepers to be cleansed and the dead to be raised, these are all answered prayers.

Jesus is a walking, talking answer to prayer for the people of Galilee and Judea. He is the embodiment of God's love and compassion. He is everything they had always hoped for in the Messiah. So it's a little odd to hear about Jesus answering a prayer and then being told to go away for doing so. But that exactly what we have in our Gospel lesson.

We're continuing this week with a series of readings from Luke's Gospel, detailing the beginning of Jesus' ministry. His first miracles, his first sermons, and, this week, his first disciples.

Last week, we heard about two particular miracles that I already mentioned: the healing of Simon Peter's mother-in-law from a dangerously high fever, and the casting out of a demon from a man in the synagogue. We also get a more general description of Jesus' miracles, which is more of the same. Lots of people healed. Lots of demons cast out.

All of this resulting in a great crowds of people flocking to see him. Because, why wouldn't they? Who doesn't want to have an answer to prayer? If you knew there was a man who could solve your worst problems, wouldn't you want to go see him?

And so Jesus ends up by the Lake of Gennesaret, also known as the Sea of Galilee. And he is being literally crushed by the crowds. They are pressing in on him from every side.

And, as a fellow preacher, I can understand Jesus' frustration with this situation. Because that is not an effective place to preach a sermon. There are about a dozen people immediately around Jesus who will be able to understand him. No one else in the crowd will hear a thing.

So he looks around and he sees a fishing boat. The fishermen were out all night while it was nice and cool and the fish were closer to the surface. Not that there were any fish to catch even then. Now that the heat of the day has come, whatever fish there were have gone deeper. And the fishermen have come to shore to clean their nets and get a little rest before they go out for another night of fishing.

This particular boat is owned by Simon Peter. Jesus already knows Simon from healing his mother-in-law and Simon allows him to use his boat. They push out from shore a bit, which gives Jesus some breathing room and lets more people hear him preach.

This goes on for a while, until Jesus finally finishes. Then he turns to Simon and says to him, "Let's go further out and try catching some fish."

Now I have to think that Simon is rolling his eyes right about now. Because Jesus knows nothing about fishing. The fact that he's even asking to fish during the heat of the day is proof of that. And Simon just wants to go home and get some sleep.

Because he has been out ALL NIGHT and caught NOTHING. Remember, this is Simon's livelihood here. He's not catching fish for the fun of it. This is not just a relaxing diversion for him. He is a professional fisherman. He should be catching enough fish not just to feed his own family, but to sell in the market. But after hours and hours of back-breaking labor he has caught nothing.

It is depressing. It is humiliating. It is scary. And I wonder how many times Simon looked up to heaven and pleaded with God, "Just one decent catch, God. Just enough to feed my family tomorrow. Just enough to not feel like a complete failure. Just... something. Anything." But no. He ends the night having caught nothing.

And then this Jesus comes along and wants him to go back out. More labor. More failure. More humiliation. But... Jesus did heal his mother-in-law. He is a respected teacher. He does seem like a pretty important guy. So... alright. I guess. Let's go back out.

You know the result, of course. A huge catch of fish. A massive, astonishing catch of fish. A catch of fish that overwhelms their nets. A catch that fills not one, but two entire boats. A catch that causes both boats to begin to sink with the weight of the fish. A catch that answers Simon's prayers.

And yet, unlike those crowds who come to Jesus for healing and walk away rejoicing, Simon's response is different. He sees this miracle unfold before him and he is terrified. He falls to his knees before Jesus and cries out, "Depart from me!"

Well that's a funny way to say thank you, isn't it? But, of course, that's not what's going on here. I'm sure Simon Peter would have been grateful, if he hadn't been quite so afraid for his life. But that's all he can think about here. "*Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.*"

It's a strange thing for us to hear, but it's actually quite appropriate. Simon has just had his prayer answered by this man called Jesus. Simon has just seen a man do something divine. Which means that God is standing in front of him. As surely as he stood before Isaiah in the Temple. God is there.

And that is a reason for fear. Because how can I stand before God? How can I, in all my sinfulness, come face to face with the Almighty? If the angels in heaven shield their faces before the Lord, how can I look upon him? If the angels in heaven must sing, "Holy, holy, holy!" in endless praise before the Lord, how can I speak to him?

This is all that Simon can think about in this moment. And it's something we should consider as well. Because every time we pray, we are standing before the throne of heaven. Every time we receive an answer to prayer, we are seeing God do something divine in front of us. And if we really, truly understood the awesome immensity of this fact, it would bring us to our knees. In fear. In humility. In gratitude.

But that's not why God calls us to prayer. That's not why Jesus answers prayer. He's not in it for our fear, or our humility, or our gratitude even. He does it out of love.

God calls us to stand before his throne in prayer because he likes to forgive sins. Just like he forgave Isaiah. Jesus answers prayer because he like to have compassion on us. Just like he had compassion on Simon Peter, and all the other people of Galilee.

And that love, that forgiveness, that compassion... it made Simon Peter realize something: the thing he had prayed for, the thing he wanted most in his life, wasn't all that important. He receives this tremendous catch of fish, an answer to his prayers, and what does he do? He leaves everything and follows Jesus.

He abandons all the fish he had caught. He abandons his boats. He abandons his entire life as he knew it. And he follows Jesus to go catch men.

You see, that's the real answer to prayer. Seeing someone healed from cancer or getting a new job or reconciling with their family, those are all wonderful things. And I am so very grateful when I see them happen.

But, truthfully, the answer to prayer that I absolutely live for as a pastor is seeing a baby baptized at this font. Or a confirmand kneeling at this rail. Or a lost soul brought into God's eternal flock. Or any of the other things that we do as this congregation to be fishers of men to our community.

Praying is wonderful. Recognizing an answer to prayer is wonderful. But even more wonderful is a sinner falling to his knees, because he realizes that he is a man of unclean lips. Even more wonderful is a sinner being told, "Do not be afraid, your sin is taken away." Even more wonderful is a new disciple of Jesus hearing God's call and following him. Because that is a prayer answered with eternal life. Amen.