

Fifth Sunday after The Epiphany, Year C
A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger
on February 9, 2025

Isaiah 6:1-8 / Psalm 138 / 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 / Luke 5:1-11

*May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in Your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer.*

Those who read for pleasure: Tell me what you're reading right now.

<FEEDBACK>

What keeps you reading the book?

<FEEDBACK>

It's an interesting story! Do you like stories? Everyone likes stories. During my first year here at St Stephen's, I had a really hard time keeping Vestry meetings at a reasonable length because every person on the Vestry at the time was a storyteller. They wanted to share their story that related to that agenda item. It was excruciating! But important, because, by-and-large, we're a congregation of storytellers and story listeners.

A lot of scripture is stories, too. Today, the passage from Isaiah is one of my favorites. It really draws me in because it's a personal story, and not only is it so descriptive that it conjures up images in my head, the speaker also expresses his vulnerability – it's palpable.

The Gospel story is in 3rd-person, but it also stimulates images and illustrates both vulnerability and empowerment. The Epistle is a letter to a community in which Paul tells his personal story of persecuting and then conversion. He uses his story as a tool to help the Corinthians better understand the need for belief in the Resurrection, lest their faith be in vain. The Psalm is a personal prayer, which will have an interesting backstory.

I believe that everyone has an interesting story. Many “ordinary” people do not think they have an interesting story, but they do. My first radio show’s tagline was:

*Every person has an interesting story,
and we’re here to share your interesting story.*

This was at the University of Chester, and students, staff and members of the wider community would be on my show for a reason and one reason only:
Something about them caught my attention, and I wanted to help share their interesting story.

My fellow NPR junkies among you may know of 2 storytelling programs on NPR. I want to share with you what they say about their own programs in order to illustrate just how powerful each person’s story is.

The first is The Moth Radio Hour:

The Moth helps people connect with their own power as a storyteller, and with one another. Our mission is to honor the diversity and commonality of human experience through the art and craft of storytelling.

And the other is even more powerful, and that’s StoryCorps

StoryCorps is committed to the idea that everyone has an important story to tell and that everyone’s story matters. Our mission: to help us believe in each other by illuminating the humanity and possibility in us all — one story at a time. Since our founding in 2003, we’ve helped nearly 700,000 people across the country have meaningful conversations about their lives.

The StoryCorps recordings are archived in the Library of Congress. BBC stole this concept that started at Oregon Public Radio. The BBC version is called *The Listening Project*.

These radio shows and podcasts like them are popular because stories themselves are fishers of people – they draw people in. This was what my MA dissertation focused on: how to draw people in to my radio show through the power of people’s stories. My empirical research was talking to producers and presenters of UK national media shows that focused on sharing people’s stories, including *The Listening Project* and Sunday morning religious talk shows.

Stories are Fishers of People. TV and movies are Fishers of People. Producers, directors, actors, composers and editors want a compelling story to reel people in. The best movies tell the best stories or tell them in a captivating way. And stories are not always direct:

- *The best music tells a story. Aaron Copland’s Appalachian Spring pulls you into the mountains on a bright sunny morning and takes you on a hike.*
- *The best visual art tells a story. Every Banksy tells the story of a misguided society.*
- *The best food tells a story. The story of Corned Beef & Cabbage on St Patrick’s Day reveals that it’s just as Irish as getting the day off work and going down th’pub.*

These are stories that reel people in. Even the best football game – the Super Bowl – tells a story. Tomorrow, when someone asks you how the game was, you won’t just say, “*Taylor Swift won or lost.*” You will tell the story of the game ... and if the story of the game is interesting enough, it will reel in the listener.

So, stories are powerful. Every person has an interesting story. Stories draw people in.

In today’s Gospel, Peter, James and John were working their trade as fishermen. Jesus was on the shore teaching when he saw the two boats. For what appears to be no reason at all, Jesus leaves His teaching and tells the fishermen to cast their nets. But Peter tells Jesus that it’s futile, as they had been fishing all night and caught nothing. But they cast their nets anyway, and caught more fish than they

could handle. And here is the epiphany of Jesus' motivation: *To call His first apostles*. Peter, James and John are the first apostles who are sent out to be Fishers of People. And we find out later, in the Book of Acts, and through other writings, that as Fishers of People, they reel them in by telling their story of their journey with Jesus.

So, what is your interesting story? What is *your* story of your journey with Jesus? What is your favorite story to tell about your faith, your faith journey or your time here? For those of you who were at the Ingathering Coffee Hour on October 27, you will remember that you sat at tables and shared with one another your stories of:

- *How did I get to St Stephen's?*
- *Why do I stay?*
- *What gifts do I receive from being a part of the St Stephen's Family?*

Your story is an interesting story that someone wants to hear – someone out there, wants to hear your story, to connect to your story, and to be drawn into the love and joy of Jesus Christ that you experience here in this place.

People 'out there' don't want to hear me, the priest, tell them that St Stephen's is a great place to worship. They really don't. That's like the restaurant owner saying:

Come to my restaurant. It's the best food in town!

Of course the restaurant owner is going to say that! Someone tries a different restaurant because someone they know and trust shared their story of an amazing dining experience.

As followers of Christ, we have accepted the same call as Peter, James and John: we are called to be apostles. As apostles, we are sent *out* in Jesus' name. As

apostles, we go *out* and take the love of Jesus to all whom we meet. The call is to GO: in love, in peace and in service to Jesus:

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

And sometimes, being sent and going in peace to love and serve will take you out of our comfort zone. But to be the apostolic church you acclaim in the Creed, you share in God's mission by going *out* rather than waiting for people to come through those doors. You are to take the Good News of Jesus *out*! And that can be in the form of your own story ...which *is* within comfort zone, because it's *your* story. The comfort of your own story needs to diminish the discomfort of the going out.

In today's Gospel, Jesus makes the apostles Fishers of People. That's not a model of ministry that's about "*come and see*"; it's a ministry about "*go and proclaim*." "*Come and see*" has its place, but that's not in today's Gospel or in any other Gospel story. You can do the apostolic "*go and proclaim*" in your very own unique way, without any training, without any special equipment, without any drain on the parish's resources. You can do that simply by sharing your story and listening to the stories of others.

Stories are very powerful. The story of why you are here this morning is very powerful. As StoryCorps' mission states:

Everyone has an important story to tell and that everyone's story matters.

That includes your story. There are people who will listen to your story, who *want* to hear your story. When you are ready to share your story, just look up to Heaven and say:

Here am I; send me.