



# THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – January 20, 2008

Tin Penny Whistles

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## Isaiah 6:1-7

<sup>1</sup> In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. <sup>2</sup> Seraphs 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. <sup>3</sup> And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." <sup>4</sup> The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. <sup>5</sup> And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" <sup>6</sup> Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. <sup>7</sup> The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out."

## Luke 5:1-11

<sup>1</sup> Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, <sup>2</sup> he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. <sup>3</sup> He got into one of the boats, the one 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. <sup>4</sup> When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." <sup>5</sup> Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." <sup>6</sup> When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. <sup>7</sup> So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. <sup>8</sup> But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" <sup>9</sup> For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; <sup>10</sup> and so also

were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." <sup>11</sup> When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

## 1 Corinthians 1:26-2:5

<sup>26</sup> Consider your own call, brothers and sisters:<sup>g</sup> not many of you were wise by human standards,<sup>h</sup> not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup> But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; <sup>28</sup> God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no one might boast in the presence of God. <sup>30</sup> He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, <sup>31</sup> in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

### Proclaiming Christ Crucified

<sup>2</sup> When I came to you, brothers and sisters,<sup>a</sup> I did not come proclaiming the mystery<sup>b</sup> of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. <sup>2</sup> For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. <sup>3</sup> And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. <sup>4</sup> My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom,<sup>c</sup> but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, <sup>5</sup> so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

One wintry night, Amy and I made our way down to Yale's old Woolsey Hall to hear James Galway in concert. Galway is a world-renowned flautist, and the concert was a lovely display of what an expert musician can do with a world class instrument. At the end of the published program, we sent Galway off with an appreciative round of applause.

<sup>g</sup> Gk brothers

<sup>h</sup> Gk according to the flesh

<sup>i</sup> Gk no flesh

<sup>j</sup> Or of

<sup>a</sup> Gk brothers

<sup>b</sup> Other ancient authorities read *testimony*

<sup>c</sup> Other ancient authorities read *the persuasiveness of wisdom*

And then came the encore. Galway reappeared, not with his flute, but with the battered, old tin penny whistle he'd played as a child. Now, few of us have ever played a concert quality flute, but almost all of us have tried playing a tin penny whistle. You place your fingers over the little holes, puff expectantly into the mouthpiece, and out comes . . . at best . . . and after much practice, the world's squeakiest, tinniest, rendition of "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." And you know, you just know, that the sound's not your fault. The sound's so awful because, well, the instrument is awful. It's just a cheap little tin tube without so much as a proper mouthpiece. What could you expect?

So, as Galway put his old tin penny whistle to his lips, we all smiled as if we were in on the joke. We knew we were about to be treated to a nostalgic, and, given the instrument, a surprisingly nice little folk tune from Galway's childhood. What we heard, however, was an amazingly complex medley of works played with such beauty and grace that we responded by leaping to our feet for a sustained ovation. A maestro's musical genius had transformed an ordinary, dime store piece of tin into an extraordinary instrument capable of exceptional beauty.

Of course, God's powers of transformation make Galway's performance look like a mere parlor trick. Throughout the Bible, and certainly in each of today's scripture lessons, God *spiritually* transforms ordinary, deeply flawed human beings into extraordinary instruments capable of exceptional beauty. Musical transformation is crowd-pleasing. Spiritual transformation is world-changing.

When we read Isaiah's account of his call as a prophet, or Luke's account of the call of the disciples, or Paul's description of God's call of the Corinthians, we are catching God right in the act of spiritual transformation. And if we look carefully, we will see the answers to three questions: first, what is God's formula for spiritual transformation? What ingredients – what steps does God use? Second, why does God do it that way? Why does God rely on spiritual transformation at all? Why doesn't God just pick a spiritual all-star team from the get-go? And, third, so what? What difference does it make for us this morning?

First, let's revisit this morning's Gospel lesson to see if we can spot God's formula. The lesson opens with Jesus standing beside the lake. He has been healing and preaching and teaching throughout Galilee. Curious crowds are beginning to follow and seek him out. He has come to teach, but he has come for more than that, he has come to call disciples – and not just any disciples, but the disciple who will lead his other disciples in Jerusalem; the disciple who will carry on after the crucifixion, courageously working under threat of death; the disciple who will serve as the head of the church in Rome.

But isn't Jesus fishing in the wrong pond. Shouldn't he be checking resumes in Jerusalem? Picking out the promising Yeshiva boys? Hobnobbing with the influential temple priests? At the very least he might choose from among the crowd that presses eagerly around him at the water's edge. But no, that's not how God's spiritual transformation works. Instead, Jesus looks past the interested crowd to disinterested fishermen washing their nets, and he calls out Simon Peter.

And if we're thinking that a hulking, uneducated, rough-handed, impetuous fisherman would be an implausible choice to be the first Bishop of Rome, we'd be right. But that's almost always the first step of spiritual transformation: God makes a habit of choosing the ordinary for the extraordinary: the aged and barren Abraham and Sarah to give birth to a new family of humanity; the murderer Moses with his speech impediment to rally his people and speak to Pharaoh; and the little shepherd boy David to take on the giant Goliath. And if this list isn't long enough for you, you could add Saul, and Jonah, and Gideon, and Isaiah, and Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and Amos, and Mary, and Paul and the Corinthians themselves. All ordinary, all called to be extraordinary. As Paul pointedly reminds the Corinthians: "*Consider your own call, brothers and sisters:<sup>g</sup> not many of you were wise by human standards,<sup>h</sup> not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.*" [1 Corinthians 1:26]

God liked this Biblical strategy so well he just stayed with it after the Bible was written. Think of Saint Augustine, the concubine-keeping libertine called to promote purity, or St. Francis, the wealthy warrior-knight called to be a poor, pacifist reformer; or Mother

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<sup>g</sup> Gk *brothers*

<sup>h</sup> Gk *according to the flesh*

Theresa, an obscure nun called to be a worldwide symbol of humane living. Want an example closer to home? How about a housewife without so much as a junior college degree called back to college and seminary so she could lead the Congregational Church of New Canaan? God's first step in spiritual transformation is to call an ordinary subject selected to do an extraordinary task.

The second step, really a human confirmation of the first step, is a cry of objection or doubt. When Peter catches on to who Jesus is and what he plans for him, he cries out, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" [Luke 5:8]

Well, Peter, welcome to the club. Moses cried, "I have never been eloquent . . . [I am] slow of speech and slow of tongue . . . O my Lord, please send someone else." [Exodus 4:10-13] Isaiah cried, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips." [Isaiah 6:5] Jeremiah cried, "Truly, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." [Jeremiah 1:7] And Paul would write the Corinthians, "I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." [1 Cor. 15:9] The second step in spiritual transformation is a good bout of resistance from the ordinary, reluctant subject of God's call.

The last and critical step for spiritual transformation God leaves in the subject's hands. It is simply the decision to follow. As C. S. Lewis put it, "God cannot ravish. He can only woo."<sup>1</sup> God recruits, but God does not draft. But when Moses trudged back to Egypt to confront Pharaoh, when David took the field against Goliath, when Isaiah prophesied in God's name, when Peter followed Jesus, when Paul evangelized the Corinthians, when the Corinthians gathered as church, the spiritual transformation was well and truly underway. God was taking the ordinary and transforming them into the extraordinary.

Now these are all amazing stories, but they lead straight to our second question – why? Why does God make it so hard for himself? Why not go with a better-targeted recruiting plan? Why this preference for the ordinary to do the extraordinary? None of us in New Canaan hire that way.

Perhaps there are three reasons. First, God's got to work with the raw material at hand. God promises a

relentless love to seek and save *all* of us. But most of us *are* ordinary and reluctant. We stir with a sudden intimation of God's call, but then we think, "No, I'm not cut out for that ministry" or "No, I don't think I know enough about the Bible." Or "No, surely God can't want me for that. Doesn't he save those jobs for the holy, the pious?" So time and again God blows through our excuses. As the renowned Yale scholar, Allen Hilton, has said, "In two millennia of Christian history, one axiom seems clear – God uses the people who show up."

Second, God follows the formula because God has a lesson to teach. It's a lesson about God's power, God's grace. God wants us to know that when God wants us to parent a people it doesn't matter how old *we* are. When God wants us to speak to Pharaoh it doesn't matter how haltingly we speak. When God wants us to battle giants, it doesn't matter how small *we* are. It was never about *Isaiah's* virtue, or *Jeremiah's* wisdom, or *Peter's* education, or *Paul's* appearance, or the *Corinthians'* wisdom, power or nobility. After all, they're not really stories about *human* power and *human* virtue, they're stories about *God's* power and *God's* grace.

As Paul said of the Corinthians: "*But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;*<sup>28</sup> *God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are,*<sup>29</sup> *so that no one might boast in the presence of God. . . . Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.*" [1 Cor. 1:27-31]

In our time, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led a people who certainly were not wise, or powerful or of noble birth by the world's standards. African-Americans had more justification than most to rise up with the power of ordinary human anger and violence, a strategy that surely would have provoked endless cycles of repression. But God's grace worked through Dr. King to inspire a movement based not on ordinary human violence but rather on the extraordinary, irresistible divine power of love.

As Dr. King preached:

*"If we are to build right here a better America, we have a method as old as the insights of Jesus of Nazareth and as modern as the*

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<sup>i</sup> Gk *no flesh*

<sup>i</sup> Or *of*

*techniques of Mohandas K. Gandhi. We need not hate; we need not use violence. We can stand up before our most violent opponent and say: We will match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we will still love you. . . . Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities after midnight hours and drag us out on some wayside road and beat us and leave us half-dead, and as difficult as it is, we will still love you. . . . Threaten our children and bomb our homes, and as difficult as it is, we will still love you.*

*Be assured that we will ride you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we will win our freedom, but we will not only win freedom for ourselves, we will so appeal to your heart and your conscience that we will win you in the process. And our victory will be a double victory.*

*And I know that Jesus is right that love is the way. And this is why John said, 'God is love,' so that he who hates does not know God, but he who loves at that moment has the key that opens the door."<sup>2</sup>*

We've been treated in the last couple of weeks to one of the least significant of political tempests in a teapot, the debate between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama: Was it Lyndon Johnson who passed the Civil Rights Act, or was it the work of Martin Luther King, Jr.? Well, what would Reverend King himself say to that question?

"It was neither."

"It was the power of God," he'd surely say, "working through the teachings and Spirit of Jesus Christ, that inspired me and a whole people to take a path that no one would have taken based on ordinary human grace and wisdom." And does anybody think that we'd be where we are now if they had *not* been so inspired?

My friends, that's the lesson God has to teach. When it comes to being extraordinary heroes for God, it is never about your power, and it is never about my power. It is always, everywhere and only about saying yes to the power of the love of God that is yearning to move through us. That's the key that opens the door to spiritual transformation.

And third, God does it this way because God has more fish to catch. When Jesus told Simon, "Do not

be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." He wasn't just talking about some limited catch in far off Palestine. He was talking about you and me. He was talking about God's relentless quest to transform ordinary folks like you and me into the extraordinary. And don't worry, God knows all about the script running through your head. "I'm not faithful enough. Not smart, not rich, not eloquent, not confident, not steadfast, not good enough. I'm not ready to be extraordinary. Maybe next year."

There's nothing wrong with these thoughts. They might even be reasonable. They're not wrong. They're just ordinary. God hears them every day. Always has. But God wants us all to be extraordinary. Always has.

Which brings us finally to the "So what?" question. What difference does any of this make for us this morning? My brothers and sisters in Christ: This morning you and I walked into a 275-year-old church facing the extraordinary challenges to faith of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We now live in a culture that undermines rather than affirms our faith and values. Our frantic pace of life erodes the time we once reserved for church, Scripture and prayer. Our congregational way is pressed by the easy certainty of fundamentalists on the right and by the cynical skepticism of atheists on the left.

Our challenging times offer us a whole new bunch of reasons to keep our heads down and to be ordinary. But challenging times or not, God still *wants* us to be extraordinary. God still needs us to proclaim God's word, teach our young, feed the hungry, fight for justice, comfort the sick, care for the poor, console the bereaved, and love one another. Challenging times or not, God still *needs* us to be extraordinary.

Picture with me a moment sometime this week when you will sit down and take a look at your schedule. Before you lies your available time, your available energy, and your available funds. Many, many voices clamor to claim them. Among those voices is the voice of God calling you to God's service. At first, a sense of enthusiasm draws you to the charge, but then you recoil. The old scripts start in your head. "But I don't know the Bible well enough to teach Sunday School." "I don't have enough talent to sing in the choir." "I don't have the time to go on an OG mission trip, or join the Yale Divinity School Bible Study, or mentor at

the George Washington Carver Center.” And so you turn away. But just then it dawns on you that you are exactly the kind of person that God always uses. You have taken your place in the long history of the hesitant, the reluctant, the ordinary that God transforms into a mighty army of the extraordinary.

My friends, take your concerns to God in prayer and remember that God’s spiritual transformation has never failed. It’s not about what you can do anyway. It’s about what God can do through you. My friends, we are all, every single one of us, only ordinary, battered tin penny whistles. But in the hands of the maestro of maestros every single one of us is capable of extraordinary beauty. **Amen.**

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1 C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 39.

2 Martin Luther King, Jr., “The American Dream,” sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, GA, 4 July 1965. Available online at [http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/sermons/650704\\_The\\_American\\_Dream.html](http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/sermons/650704_The_American_Dream.html).