

Epiphany 5C

February 7, 2010

Hymns: 303 - 555 - 525(before Council Installation) - 385(Communion) - 566v3 read at end of Service

I CORINTHIANS 15:9-10

GOD'S WORD – THE GREAT DISCOVERY CHANNEL!

***Discover Your Sinfulness Before God.**

***Discover God's Grace In The Cross.**

***Discover God's Plan For You In Life.**

We all are one in mission. We all are one in call.

Our varied gifts united by Christ, the Lord of all.

A single great commission compels us from above

To plan and work together that all may know Christ's love. Amen. CW 566, v1

Dear Sinner, Saint, and Servant,

It was just after midnight on November 20, 1988. A 19-year-old Los Angeles woman apparently fell asleep behind the wheel of her car. The car plunged through a guardrail and was left dangling by its left rear wheel. That one wheel was all that prevented the young woman from falling to a certain death. A half dozen passing motorists stopped and attempted to help. One of them had some ropes in his vehicle. They tied the ropes to the back of the young woman's car, and hung on until the fire units arrived. A ladder was extended from below to help stabilize the car while firefighters tied the vehicle to tow trucks with cables and chains.

"Every time we would move the car," said one of the rescuers, "she'd yell and scream. She was in pain." It took almost 2 1/2 hours for the rescuers--about 25 of them in all--to secure the car and pull the woman to safety. "It was kinda funny," L.A. County Fire Capt. Ross Marshall recalled later. "She kept saying, 'I'll do it myself. I'll do it myself.'"

People are funny like that. "I'll do it myself." Against all evidence to the contrary, we somehow think we don't need other people. By nature, we think we don't even need God. In our readings we have met three men this morning--three men who had their lives radically changed by God. We're going to see how God changed their lives, and we are going to ask God to do the same for us.

Our Old Testament Lesson described an encounter that the prophet Isaiah had with God. He writes, *'Woe to me!' I cried. 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.'* Keep this story in mind as we turn to the Gospel Lesson for today and to a similar episode in the life of Simon Peter.

One day Jesus was preaching on the shore of a lake. A crowd of people was pressing in on Him. He noticed two empty boats that were standing at the water's edge while the fishermen cleaned their nets. Stepping into one of the boats, Jesus asked Simon, its owner, to push out a little farther into the water, so that He could sit in the boat and speak to the crowds from there. When He finished speaking, Jesus turned to Simon and said, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch."

Simon was weary and he answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because You say so, I will let down the nets." And this time the nets were so full that they began to tear. In fact, it was not long until both boats were so full of fish that they were about to sink. The Scriptures tell us that when Simon, whom Jesus renamed Peter (the Rock), realized the full import of what had happened, he fell to his knees before Jesus and said, **"Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"**

Again, what a beautiful and memorable story. Simon Peter met Jesus and he was a changed man. But, I have one more story. It concerns the Apostle Paul. You will remember how the resurrected Christ appeared to the disciples--first to Peter and later to the rest of the twelve, and then to five hundred more followers--most of whom were still alive when Paul wrote--"and last of all," Paul writes, "He appeared to me also, as to one

abnormally born.” Listen as Paul continues, *“For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.*

Do you see the similarities? Three men who impacted history, whose lives were profoundly changed by an encounter with God. Those encounters followed similar paths of discovery. With them, may you first of all...

Slide 1 Discover Your Sinfulness Before God “Woe to me!” cried Isaiah when he encountered God, “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips . . .” Now Isaiah was a good man, a righteous man. But suddenly, in the presence of God, he saw himself as he really was. He saw that much of his righteousness, like our righteousness, was merely a sham.

Simon Peter probably thought he had it made too. After all, he owned his own fishing boat. He was a successful small businessman. He had his work, his family, his health. What more could anyone ask? Peter didn’t know the answer to that until that fateful day when he crossed paths with Jesus of Nazareth. Notice his response when he realizes just who Jesus is, “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” Like Isaiah, Simon Peter suddenly realized just how empty and meaningless his life had really been. His complacency was shattered the day he met the Master and discovered the truth not only about Christ, but about himself.

As for St. Paul, he had a different name before he met the resurrected Christ. He was Saul, the dreaded persecutor of the early Christian community. What a radical change took place in his life the day he met the Master! Suddenly he was aware of just how misguided, how cruel, how vindictive his previous life had been. It’s hard to believe that Saul the persecutor could become Paul, the author of I Corinthians 13, which we had as our Epistle Lesson last Sunday. That 13th Chapter of First Corinthians is the greatest existing document in literature on the subject of love. Only Christ could make that change in a person. And what does Paul say about himself? “For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle . . .” All three of these men, when confronted with divine power and perfection, suddenly saw themselves as they really were--sinners in desperate need.

My friends, each of us needs to see ourself as we really are. If we are going to become what God has called us to be.... That is the first path toward a changed life--the path of self-discovery. All three of these men came to see, first of all, their sinfulness.

Slide 2 Secondly, Discover God’s Grace In The Cross. Isaiah cried out, “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips . . .” And a seraphim touched Isaiah’s lips with a live coal and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.” Peter acknowledges his own guilt and immediately Jesus tells him, “Don’t be afraid . . . I will make you fishers of men . . .” And St. Paul writes, “By the grace of God I am what I am.”

May I ask you a very important question? Do you continue to experience Divine grace? Can you truly sing from your heart: “Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.”? We take pride in our self-sufficiency, don’t we? We take pride in our respectability. Like the woman hanging from the bridge, we stubbornly claim, “I can help myself.” And at those times when we don’t feel the need for salvation, we cannot appreciate the desperately needed grace in the blood of Christ. To see ourselves as we really are and to experience the bountiful grace of Jesus Christ is the most dramatic experience each man, woman, and child must have – and have repeated in confession of and absolution from sin. We need to come to the Lord’s altar just as we are without one plea, and leave with the assurance of forgiveness and life in the body and blood of our Savior!

Who is the writer of the hymn “Amazing Grace?” A former 18th Century slave trader named John Newton. Most of us cannot fathom the human suffering he was part of in ripping young people from their families and homes in Africa, to be transported for months chained to the walls in the belly of a ship, and finally sold on an auction block to the highest bidder. John Newton knew his sin, and joyfully came to know his Savior in Jesus and the cross. Some time in our life – No! Over and over again! - we must come to realize our absolute dependence upon God, and we must experience God’s power to make us into a new creation. Otherwise, we will never know the joy of our salvation - Seeing ourselves as we really are and experiencing God’s grace.

This is how real change takes place in the believer's life. But this is not the end of the journey. In a way, it is only the beginning.....

Slide 3 For You still need to **Discover God's Plan For You In Life**. The Lord asks, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?" And Isaiah cries out, "Here am I, send me." Jesus says to the frightened Simon Peter, "I will make you a fisher of men." And St. Paul, who became the great missionary apostle, acknowledged that because he persecuted the Christians he was the least of the Apostles, but he adds, "I worked harder than any of them." That's what happens when we have an encounter with the living God. We respond to the call to go, to give, to be more than we've ever been before.

Do you sometimes feel that you are not up to the calling of God to serve in His Church and others in your daily lives? The devil would have you think that you are not good enough, not worthy, to serve God and His Church – and he is right! But that didn't stop God from using awe-struck Isaiah, the humbled fisherman Peter, and the former Christian murdering Saul. Someone has observed: "Nothing is perfect . . . There's no perfect airline. There's no perfect government. There's no perfect law. Faucets still drip. Nothing is done completely and finally." And friend, God isn't done with you yet either! Nor will He be until in eternity you reach perfection! We live in an imperfect world in which there is always room for improvement. If there is any group of people who ought to understand that, it is the followers of Christ. We are imperfect people living in an imperfect world. And there is much that needs to be done in Christ's name by sinners – yet saints by God's grace! - such as you and me.

Slide 4 Would you like to have your life changed like Isaiah, Peter and Paul? The process is a simple one, really. It begins with a confrontation with the living God where we see ourselves as the sinners we really are. As you ponder the truth that you cannot save yourself, may you experience God's amazing grace in Christ! As a result of these experiences, may you go out to live with a sense of direction, of purpose, of divine destiny. Dear sinner, discover for yourself God's wonderful grace, and then share it with others! Amen.

We all are called to service, to witness in God's name.

Our ministries are different, Our purpose is the same:

To touch the lives of others with God's surprising grace,

So ev'ry folk and nation may feel God's warm embrace. Amen. CW 566, v2