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**Meeting God**

Luke 5:8a

During his pastorate at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, David Read once preached a sermon with the provocative title, "Virginia Woolf Meets Charlie Brown." He took his title from two Broadway productions that were playing at the time, Edward Albee's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" and "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown," based on the comic strip. Read was setting up a contrast between two ways of looking at life. Virginia Woolf has come to express the cynicism of those who are wise by the standards of the world. Read saw in this play "a world of cleverness without compassion, of wit without humor, of passion without values, of fantasy unredeemed by faith." The play depicts people who have mastered most of the answers the world can give but can do no more with those answers than descend into "a hell of alienation, lovelessness, hopelessness, and total loss of meaning." Charlie Brown on the other hand never has the answers. He is always befuddled by the complexities of this world. And yet his ears are always open to hear the surprising word which finds us in our weakness. Because Charlie Brown is so fully in touch with his frailty, he is ready to be transformed.

This is the journey that Simon Peter makes in the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of the gospel of Luke. Peter has lived in the world of Virginia Woolf. As a successful fisherman he has learned to survive by his own wits. He is a businessman who has learned the hard lesson of trusting no one but himself. But Luke tells us how Peter arrived at the less cynical perspective of Charlie Brown.

Peter's transformation begins on a fishing trip. Jesus had been speaking to the crowd gathered on the shore from a boat which belonged to Peter. This made it possible for Jesus to teach the people while avoiding being overwhelmed by crowds who wanted to be close to him. It was a creative technique for crowd control. When the teaching session was over Jesus was ready to put out into the deep water for some serious fishing. Peter was convinced that this was ill-advised because he and his colleagues had fished this part of the lake all night long. It hurt Peter that Jesus ignored his advice. Jesus knew that in this area Peter was a professional. But Jesus was insistent and Peter obeyed. What happened next was the last thing that a fisherman like Peter would expect. The catch was so huge the nets were beginning to break. Another boat was brought in to help, but still they could not handle all the fish without endangering the boats.

Peter fell down at Jesus' knees because he had no conceptual framework by which to make sense of this experience. His cynicism had been shattered. For the first time in his life he was as clueless as Charlie Brown. His perspective would never be the same again. The catching of fish was no longer a career for Peter. When it was all over, Peter beached his boat and left this huge haul of fish to rot by the shore. Peter was no longer interested in pursuing his profession. His imagination had been captivated by another kind of activity. When Jesus spoke of fishing for people, Peter's image of fishing was radically changed. No longer was fishing an image for acquisition. It had become, instead, an image for ministering to the needs of others. Fishing for people meant nothing less than demonstrating the compassion of God for the whole human family.

A similar change of perspective comes to the prophet Isaiah when he experiences the call of God. In the sixth chapter of the book of Isaiah the prophet is trying to come to terms with the changes that are taking place in the northern Israelite nation of Judah. It was the year of King Uzziah's death. Uzziah was the last of Judah's truly powerful monarchs. People like Isaiah would have been keenly aware of the fact that these were perilous times for the nation. Isaiah could see that in all probability the fortunes of the nation would decline. In this dangerous atmosphere, the prophet will need to make his way as a leader. How will he understand his sense of mission? What are the resources of worldly wisdom on which he can call in these perilous times?

As Isaiah contemplated this issue he found himself in the temple. And there he is addressed by God. But God does not offer Isaiah the key to solving the problems of the nation. God does not promise to make him wise by the standards of this world. Instead, Isaiah has an encounter in which his worldly cynicism is shattered. The moment of transformation for Isaiah comes when the burning coal is placed on his lips. The coal symbolizes God's justice and compassion. And at this moment Isaiah knows that he will not be a mover and shaker on the political stage of Judah. He has met God and his perspective has been changed. His mission is to share God's word of compassion and to let that word be a source of healing in his community.

This is our mission, too. Kyle Childress has written of the first person he saw undergo this kind of transformation. He writes:

I was only seven or eight when one of our small-town West Texas heroes came home from Vietnam. He had lived three doors down from me, was a star on the high school football team, and had been in my father's Sunday school class before going off to Vietnam. He came back with one leg and a message. God told him, he said, that the war was wrong and that our church and our town needed to change our minds and hearts about racial segregation. Since he was never given the opportunity to stand in the pulpit and testify, he prophesied in casual conversation, but the results were the same: everyone talked about what he said, what had happened to him over there, and whether or not the war had messed up his head. One Sunday after church, my father commented to my mother that perhaps the boy had some mental problems from Vietnam, but that didn't mean that what he said was wrong. Soon my father, a member of the local school board, began pushing for our schools to be integrated (*Christian Century*, January 9, 2007, page 19).

For this young man, meeting God meant offering his brokenness to bring healing to his community.

And so it is for us. It all begins with our willingness to make the journey Peter made. On this journey we learn to embrace human frailty. For it is in frailty that we best hear and proclaim God's healing word of compassion.