

Isaiah 6:1-8

Psalm 138

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Luke 5:1-11

In the Name of the One, Holy, and Everliving God. + AMEN.

Good morning! For those of you who don't know me, I am Emily's husband, Andy Guffey. And the first thing I want to say is, Thank you! As this is a family service, it is very fitting that I should have the opportunity to thank you for welcoming *our* family into *your* family. Over the past couple of months I have been able to see what Emily knew from the beginning and what I trusted to be true: you all are great! Thank you for the care and the warmth you have shown to us as we have settled in.

Well, as I mentioned, this is a family service, so as I was reflecting on the lessons for this week, another lesson came to mind, a reading from a less well known book of Scripture, Margaret Wise Brown's *The Runaway Bunny*.¹

We used to read *The Runaway Bunny* to our boys. If you don't know it, it is a very simple story. It begins like this:

*Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away.
So he said to his mother, "I am running away."
"If you run away," said his mother, "I will run after you.
For you are my little bunny."*

*"If you run after me," said the little bunny,
"I will become a fish in a trout stream
and I will swim away from you."*

*"If you become a fish in a trout stream," said his mother,
"I will become a fisherman and I will fish for you."*

*"If you become a fisherman," said the little bunny,
"I will become a rock on the mountain, high above you."*

And it goes on and on. One of my favorites is when the little bunny says they will become a bird and fly away.

*"If you become a bird and fly away from me,"
said his mother, "I will be a tree that you come home to."*

The story ends when the little bunny decides it's no use going to all the trouble. He decides he could become a little boy and run into a house:

*"If you become a little boy and run into a house,"
said the mother bunny, "I will become your mother
and catch you in my arms and hug you."*

¹ Margaret Wise Brown and Clement Hurd (illustr.), *The Runaway Bunny* (New York: Harper & Row, 1942). You can also find it read on YouTube. For instance: <https://youtu.be/hOKpIgH6kJw>.

"Shucks," said the bunny, "I might just as well stay where I am and be your little bunny."

And so he did.

"Have a carrot," said the mother bunny.

It should not come as much of a surprise, I suppose, that some have interpreted this story as a story that is like God's love for all of us. Now some people find the mother in this story a little overbearing. I saw—where else?—on the internet, that there are some who think the mother is being very controlling. And, they say, if that's what God's love is like, no thank you! I don't think that's quite fair. I hear it differently. What I hear is a game being played. The Little Bunny wants to know how far he can go before his mother will stop looking for him, how secret and how different he can become before his mother stops loving him. And her answer is: there is no limit; my arms will always be open to you and I will always love you. No matter what.

And that, is what the Scriptures tell us about God today, through three different figures: Isaiah, Paul, and Peter.

"Here I am, Lord. Send me." These are the ringing words of the text from Isaiah. "Here I am. Send me." They are often invoked at ordinations. They bear a kind of confidence and strength. Is this the model for what it means to be a Christian? Here I am; send me. Well, yes, and no. Certainly, God is always calling us into mission. To feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and care for all in need. Certainly, God has work for us to accomplish. But I don't think the point of Isaiah is that our response to God's call is to be some firm and resolute "Here I am. Send me." Consider the whole story. Isaiah does not begin with confidence, but with an awareness of his unsuitability for the task: 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!"

And even after Isaiah lips are touched by the burning coal, we might still wonder how much of Isaiah's response was confidence and how much was courage. How much of Isaiah's "Here I am. Send me" is really, "Well, I'm the only one here. I guess it's me. I'll do." "Shucks," said Isaiah, "I might as well go. I'm your Little Bunny."

Peter, too, in the Gospel reading wants to run away. Or rather, he wants Jesus to desert him. He plays the same game as the Little Bunny. You can almost hear the sarcasm in his voice when he says, "Master, we've been fishing all day and nothing. But sure, yeah, we'll do it again because you say so." And what does he say when they bring in their haul? ""Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" But Jesus says, "Do not be afraid." Do not be afraid, I'm not going away from you. You are my Little Bunny.

Then there's Paul. In what may seem like an otherwise dry recital of the tradition with which Paul's Corinthians were familiar, he sneaks in a line that you might not have noticed. We are accustomed to thinking of Paul perhaps as a blow-hard. Or at least as someone with a great deal of confidence. But then there's this little line: "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the

least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” Paul, too, begins from an awareness of his failings.

Now I could make a point here about being called to mission. Isaiah, and Peter, and Paul are all called to a particular sort of mission. Isaiah was called to be a prophet to God’s people, Peter was called to be an apostle—to become of fisher for people, and Paul was called to be the apostle to the Nations, or the Gentiles. Each of these has a distinct vocation to which God is calling them. And I could remind you that our baptismal covenant likewise calls us to be disciples of Jesus Christ, and that means we have work to do. All of that is true. But there is something perhaps just a bit deeper that these Scriptures want to show us, not just about our vocation to be the body of Christ in the world, but about who God is and who we are before God.

Each of these stories is a lesson in imperfection and failure as much as a lesson of triumph. Each of these figures confesses that they would rather run away. They are failures. But it is at that point that God’s love, and grace, and mercy come through all the more clearly. The call to mission or to ministry—to acts of justice and mercy—is first and foremost a call, a persistent drumming, to come, to return, time and again, to God’s embrace, which is always waiting, always welcoming. God is always longing for us to return, not to find security in our own confidence but to find our courage in God’s radical welcome.

In case I’m being too obtuse, let me put it this way: Nothing you’ve done is too much, and nothing you are is unlovable. That is what is so inscrutable about God’s love. There is no limit to how far you can wander or how much you can change that will ever make God stop loving you. There is no point at which God abandons you. You don’t have to be good, or right, or successful to earn God’s love. God loves you, the lovable and the unlovable. God longs for, calls out to, even the most wayward. The invitation is always open for us to say, “Shucks, I might as well come back and be your little bunny.”

We don’t need to be perfect. We don’t even need to be particularly good. We just need to be a little bit brave: to be willing to say with Isaiah, “Here I am. Here I am.” With my fears and bitterness and hardness of heart. Here I am with my failures laid bear. How can I help? Send me. To the hard and thankless tasks. To the fun and joyful ones. Here I am. Send me.

There is a text by the Sufi mystic Rumi that captures the invitation. Ana Hernandez, who does great work with congregational music, set it to a tune.² Here is the text:

Come, come, whoever you are
Worshipper, wanderer, lover of leaving
Ours is not a caravan of despair
Though you have broken your vows
A thousand times
Come, come again, come.

AMEN.

² You can find Ana teaching this song to a workshop on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/vG8QO0bj9Hs>