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Miraculous catch of fish, detail from a stained glass window in St. Colman's Cathedral, Cobh, Ireland (Teresa Malcolm)



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"Go out into the deep." Think about it, that's what the son of a carpenter said to professional fishers. They did it, perhaps just to humor him — and took in the biggest catch of their lives. A fluke? A trick? Or a sign of things to come? Whatever, it overwhelmed them.

Does anything overwhelm us today? When we can talk face to face with someone across the world, fly anywhere we wish, and carry phones and watches that effectively replace TV, libraries, computers, cash and credit cards, what can really astonish us?

Surely, we're terrified at the power of hurricanes, tornadoes and wildfires — at least if we experience them in person. We could add any number of other dangerous things that cause everything in our heart, mind and body to panic and concentrate on how to save ourselves or our vulnerable loved ones. This kind of being overwhelmed is rooted in fear.

There's another realm of mystifying experiences that awakens an awe that moves our guts like fear, but differently. For lovers of Latin, it's called *mysterium tremendum et facinans*, an awesome, fascinating [mystery](#). This is no rational experience, but a breathtaking and irresistible awareness of the presence of the beauty, immensity and truth of the divine.

## **Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

[February 9, 2025](#)

Isaiah 6:1-2a, 3-8

Psalm 138

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Luke 5:1-11

Many people experience this in holy places — they feel a tremendous and peaceful presence that permeates the atmosphere.

Isaiah experienced this *mysterium* in a heavenly vision. For Peter and companions, it happened when they obeyed the preacher on their boat. The experience brought all of them to their knees — figuratively, if not literally. They felt insignificant and unworthy in the presence of something so great — a very sane and normal response!

Intriguingly, the message they heard during their experience took little account of their feelings of dread. When Isaiah cried, "Woe is me! ... I am unclean," an angel touched him with fire and declared, "Your wickedness is removed." So then, when he heard the question, "Whom shall I send?" Isaiah could answer like a kid being picked for a team, "Here I am, send me!"

The fishermen who welcomed Jesus onto their boat and then got their catch were stunned. Nothing in their experience prepared them to interpret what was going on. In response to their statements of unworthiness, Jesus invited them to step beyond fear so they could sacramentalize their profession, consecrating their skills to spreading the news that God was actively reigning among them.

These are stories about our human vocation. They make no more sense than falling in love. Such experiences are uncontrollable, real, unexplainable and transforming. They become the touchstone of one's life because they involve an encounter between one's deepest self and God our Creator.

Today's readings suggest that we ask ourselves if we have become too sophisticated or technical or just too busy to experience the *mysterium tremendum*. Our scriptural tradition suggests that God keeps vigil for us, providing opportunities for us to become caught up in the wonder of life waiting to take shape in and among us. God longs for us to assume the fullness of our vocation to know and be the good news Christ preached.

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It's easy to see the life-threatening natural and human-produced dangers around us. Like Isaiah of the unclean lips and the self-described sinful fishers, it's easy to let

ourselves be paralyzed when confronting powers beyond our comprehension.

Remember, the call to faith begins with the words, "Do not be afraid." The rationale for acting with audacious courage comes from the fact that we know we cannot do it with our own power.

Isaiah's vision included two questions: "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" All Isaiah needed to do was offer. Without any clue about what was to come, the intense awareness of goodness he experienced impelled him to say, "Here I am!" That transformed him from spectator to prophet.

The same goes for the fishermen. Jesus said, "Do not be afraid, you are on the brink of transformation." They could share his mission and they were only required to allow God to work through them.

As in the days of Isaiah and Peter, God continues to be the great seeker, lover, even, as Jeremiah said, a seducer ([Jeremiah 20:7](#)). The God of Jesus wants us, all we are, in the depths of who we are. The God of Jesus depends on simple human messengers who are willing to be overwhelmed and transformed and sent.

When the experience of evil feels as palpable as the *mysterium*, we may well be afraid. Yet, our very distress constitutes the call to stand up against destruction and injustice.

We're not called to do it alone. All we need is to say, "Here I am. Send me!" The sender will handle the rest.

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