

## **“Remember the First Time”**

Dr. D. Jay Losher, Jr.  
Stoke's Barn, Pampa, Texas ~ 18 July 2010

*I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple....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!”*

*Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal....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.” Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!” [Isaiah 6:1-8]*

*When [Jesus] had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. 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. [Luke 5:4-7]*

**“Do you remember** where you were when Kennedy was assassinated?” I do. Most of us do – in rich detail. How many can tell exactly where we were and what we were doing? Even down to some were wearing, the weather, the colors and textures of light? It made a memory so vivid that repeated telling does not lead to “overhearing.”

**“Do you remember.....when you encountered your first Volkswagen?”** Believe it or not, that came up in formal dinner conversation some years ago. Incredibly, almost everyone present had owned a Volkswagen at one time or another. My family has owned three over the years.

The common stories almost all seemed to gravitate around affectionate remembrances of maintenance nightmares. Then again, the VW my brother Lee bought turned out that it had been owned once by Mr. Davis, the HS choir director and later was sold to a friend. After consideration, it would seem that there is probably only one VW bug in Pampa and it just kept making the rounds being constantly repainted. Perhaps like the urban legend about fruitcake, there is really only one VW bug in the whole US and it has just been passed from one to another.

I remember vividly the first VW I ever saw: that strange, funny car. A weathered tan which may have once actually been yellow. It belonged to my first grade teacher, Miss Abbott. She was married I think, but in those days almost all young female teachers were addressed as “Miss.” I contrived some excuse so I could get a ride home.

**“Do you remember.....where you were when you tasted your first Dr Pepper?”** Yes, in the Texas where I grew up it is not Coke or Pepsi but only Dr. Pepper which can make such an impression. And I do remember. At Miss Abbott's end of year picnic ~ you might think I had a crush on her, but I believe it was really the Dr Pepper – and the Volkswagen.

*“Do you remember.....when you heard this story for the very first time of Jesus commanding the disciples to fish on the other side?”*

I do. This is the first sermon I can remember. Before the day of children’s sermons, it was the first time I was in big peoples’ church. I remember every aspect of it in detail. I was about six, living with my maternal grandmother, ~ a stern matriarch of a woman who, despite that severe exterior, never could quite hide her love and affection for the two rowdy grandsons in her care.

Grandmother Pratt set me down and explained in her matter-of-fact way that now that I was six, I had the unadulterated privilege of coming to worship. I wasn’t to wiggle or squirm or talk or act up ~ I was to listen.

You would have thought I had been sentenced to purgatory. What had I done to deserve this? With the same fear and trembling as Isaiah described, I entered the temple for the first time.

**Ron Hubbard** would have been pastor at that time. I really did not know him at that point, but I do have an extraordinarily vivid memory of him in the pulpit that day. The Holy of Holies could not have been more powerfully frighteningly fascinating for Isaiah.

The light from the rose window came streaming down over his left shoulder, spotlighting him and the pulpit in stark contrast with the darkened sanctuary. A voice like drawn steel which could keep even the attention of a bouncy first grader unaccustomed to church.

Expository preaching may be dead, but Ron Hubbard practiced it in spades. Vividly, dramatically, he drew out the story of Jesus commanding the disciples to draw their nets to the other side. When Simon tried to lift up the overwhelmed nets, Rev. Hubbard’s hand reached over the side of the pulpit. He pulled against the imagined net. You could see the strain and you could feel the weight. Vivid enough, dramatic enough so that even a six year old could comprehend it by feeling the overstraining nets just begin to snap.

Expository preaching may be dead, but in the hands of a master storyteller the power of the Word to grasp us, to hold us, to challenge us is still compelling.

*“Where were you, when you first heard this story?”*

But even more: *“Where were you when it first really sank in?”*

**I heard it first** in that sanctuary so many years ago. But I really grasped the story ~ and was grasped, grabbed and held by it ~ decades later in Indonesia. First time I really came in contact with persons who made their living and livelihood by fishing with nets. In Indonesia today, as it was on Lake Gennesaret in the disciples’ day, fishing is mind-numbing and body -straining work with disappointing results and extraordinary low return on one’s labor.

In Indonesia, many were former political prisoners who as outcasts could inhabit only the lowest rung on the economic food chain. The women who wove the nets would earn about 2½ cents for two full day’s labor ~ not even enough to buy a small bowl of rice. Most nights and days were like Peter’s: “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing.”

One day I met a fisherman going home. I asked to see his catch for the day. He pulled out three small fish, the size of midget goldfish. And inexplicably to me, he smiled like he had caught a whale. He said it was a pretty good day. It was, it is desperate work.

**Imagine** then Simon, aka Peter. Peter was not a successful businessman. He was a simple peasant fisherman, broken by work, bone-weary, mind-numbed; and yet when Jesus requested, Peter raised his weary self and yet one more one more time cast the nets.

Imagine then his surprise, the joy turned to fear, as the enormous haul threatened to capsize the boat. Peter accustomed to a few small fish from a night's work must have been dumbfounded, completely confounded by this windfall.

Jesus ends this encounter:

*“Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.”*

**Isaiah 6**, Isaiah's encounter with God in the temple, as distant and different as it seems is still the same story ~ both are narratives of Peter's and Isaiah's call, repentance and response all through a compelling experience of the fearful and fascinating power of God.

When God called him, Isaiah stood upright and in a clear voice,

*“Here I am, send me.”*

When Jesus had called Peter, James and John, the Bible records

*“They left everything and followed Jesus.”*

*“Do you remember.....when you were first called out by God?”* When you first heard that persistent voice of God calling, cajoling, commanding, compelling.

**Old familiar texts** ~ indeed overly familiar. As Fred Craddock says, we can “overhear the Gospel,” that is, we can miss the meaning because we've heard it so many times to the point of not hearing any more.

So remember back to the first time.

Remember the awe and wonder and fear on hearing for the first time Isaiah's fear and trembling in the temple. Remember the awe and skepticism you greeted your first reading of the miraculous harvest of fish. Remember so you can re-appropriate that powerful, compelling, lost sense of wonder at the Word.

As Jesus called the disciples to fish for persons, as God called Isaiah to prophesy,

- Remember then the very first time you heard each of these narratives.
- Remember then your own calling.
- Remember then your own personal encounter with the living God.
- Remember whose you are, who claims you and who redeems you.