

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 7, 2016

Hearing our Gospel reading about a day in the life of Simon Peter, we can imagine how the security and happiness of his family depended on his fishing skills and success.

But we find him today in a moment of failure. We shouldn't think it was his only failure. He probably encountered many other such moments in the years he had been in business.

And many of us know the feeling; many of us have had moments of such overwhelming doubt that maybe we've been ready to give up. It's in those moments we can severely judge ourselves to be failures.

We wonder if we've made a difference in the lives of those around us?

Or maybe we wonder if we even *can* make a difference?

In today's first reading we find the prophet Isaiah in a similar state of mind. His soul was heavy; we are told he felt "doomed". His nation was divided between north and south.

The Assyrians had conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Israelites were scattered throughout the lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea.

Meanwhile, the Southern Kingdom of Judah was languishing in one civil war following another. The religion founded on the faith of Abraham had fallen into little more than observing a series of formalities. Real belief in God had all but vanished. King Uzziah, once wise and trusted, had fallen into disgrace and had recently died in dishonor.

On top of all that, Isaiah found himself at this point held in contempt by those to whom God had sent him.

No one was listening to him; some wanted to get rid of him by killing him. Isaiah was very conscious of his failures and limitations.

And you and I can certainly relate to Isaiah. Because failure always raises questions; questions about ourselves and questions about God.

One of those questions might be if God is so good, why is there so much suffering in the world?

The Greek philosopher Epicurus, who lived 300 years after Isaiah, gave this argument that is still used by atheists today: "Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able to prevent evil, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing to prevent evil? Then from where did evil come? Is he neither able nor willing to prevent evil? Then why call him God?"

We ask these kinds of questions because we can't begin to imagine a God who would allow evil and pain to afflict innocent people.

But isn't that the problem? Why should our conceptions of God be limited by our finite human imaginations? The problem's with us - not with God.

Do we limit God by our limitations? Do we allow ourselves to worship a God who is so small that He only fits into our little intellectual categories?

Peter was offered a window of opportunity that came to him when he least expected it, after a night of failure.

He took the chance, gave God what little he did have, which was hope and trust,

and suddenly defeat was transformed into victory.

Peter, admitting he was a sinner, heard Jesus say: "Look, I know you're rough, impulsive, strong-willed, and even a racist bigot. But you've given me your best, and now I'm going to give you my best."

That's why it's true that people who have been deeply wounded often become the greatest healers.

Recovering alcoholics often become the best rescuers of drinking alcoholics. Slow learners become great teachers.

Some of our greatest athletes are people who have been told they have no talent. Beethoven wrote his greatest symphony when he was stone deaf.

The point is, if we try to limit God by our own limitations we'll only succeed in limiting ourselves. Isaiah, like Simon Peter, was given a window of opportunity in the midst of failure.

He took the opportunity and said: "Here I am Lord, send me."

How then, do we respond to failure? Do we see it as a challenge and then at a deeper level see that every challenge is but an opportunity? Do we respond like Isaiah and Simon Peter? If we want to respond as they did, we can't limit God by our own limited little imaginations.

We're not responsible for everything that happens in our lives. We're responsible only for how we respond — not God, not others, not the government, not life.

That's the challenge of faith, because faith isn't simply our obedience to a creed or to a set of doctrines. Faith is how we *act* in life, the place in which God comes to us.

We may think that everything depends on us, but we'd be very wrong. And we may think that we're a failure and will never make a difference in the world. And that kind of thinking would be equally wrong.

The only way to face life is with the belief that "with God, anything is possible," and then living our lives by taking that leap of faith, depending solely on Him. Then even when we fail, we are victorious.