

“Drop Your Nets”

Luke 5.1-11

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February 10, 2019

Let’s set this story in context. Luke says it takes place “beside Lake Gennesaret.” That’s just another name for **the Sea of Galilee**, that very large fresh water lake where numerous stories in the gospels take place. It’s a big lake – 8 miles wide and 13 miles long, about 64 square miles on the surface, 33 miles around the perimeter. **It’s a gorgeous lake.** From where Jesus and the disciples were – mostly on the northwestern shore – you have a fabulous view of flat-topped mountains on the eastern shore. Some days, **when it’s hazy**, you can’t see the other side; the mountains just fade off into the clouds.

It’s a fishing lake. There has been commercial fishing on this lake for more than two thousand years. Today, about 600,000 pounds of fish are caught every year in the Sea of Galilee. If you go to a restaurant in Galilee, you can order freshly caught **fish that looks like this**. It’s called “St. Peter’s Fish.” It’s a red-bellied tilapia. It’s quite good – though I opted for the filet rather than the whole fish!

Two thousand years ago, fishermen used **boats like this**. This is the remains of a 2000-year-old boat. It’s 27 feet long and 7.5 feet wide. It was found in 1986 along the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee – *precisely* the region that Jesus and his disciples spent a lot of time in. So if you find a boat from the time of Jesus, in the region where Jesus was, what do you call it? You call it the “Jesus Boat.” Seriously, that’s what it’s called! It probably wasn’t the boat that Jesus sat in – but it’s close enough.

To catch fish, fishermen would have used **nets that looked something like this**. It’s a reasonably big net, with weights around the edges. You throw it out onto the water, flat. The weights start to pull the net down, so whatever is under the net starts to get enveloped. Then you pull on a cord, and it tightens, enveloping the fish that are under the net. You haul the net back to your boat, you empty the fish into your boat, and you throw it out again. And you just keep doing that. Periodically, you have to stop to clean out any gunk that’s accumulated in there, or to mend any rips and tears. Fishing with nets tends to work better at nighttime, when the fish are closer to the surface of the water.

One night, 2000 years ago, a handful of fisherman were out on that lake, in two boats, having a tough go of it. They just weren’t catching anything. In the morning they pulled their boats to the shore (**which looks like this**) and started cleaning their nets. The fishermen needed to get those nets fixed up so they could try again another night; this was how they made their living, by catching and selling fish.

Luke makes it clear that there were at least four fishermen in those two boats. He gives us three

names: Simon Peter, James, and John. The fourth was probably Andrew. We know those names, of course; they will soon become four of Jesus' apostles. But right now they are just ordinary fishermen.

Also at the shoreline that morning was a teacher and a crowd of people. In Luke's version of this story, Peter would have recognized the teacher. Luke says that this teacher had already visited Peter's house, in nearby Capernaum. He had healed Peter's mother-in-law, who had been sick with a high fever. He had also healed many other people. Peter would have known the teacher's name, Jesus – actually, it would have been *Yeshua*, a good Hebrew name – and that he had come from the town of Nazareth, some 20 miles to the southwest. This was not Peter's first encounter with this teacher.

Evidently, the teacher was attracting quite a number of people, and they all wanted to be able to hear him, so they kept coming closer to the water. Jesus must have asked Peter for help. Peter gets into the boat with Jesus, and Jesus asks him to pull the boat out just a little bit from the shore, so the people on the shoreline can still hear him as he talks. Jesus sits there, in the boat, teaching the people, until he's done with his lesson for the day. The crowds disperse; he and Peter are still in the boat. Peter probably thinks it's time to pull the boat back to shore and get back to the business of cleaning those nets. But Jesus asks him to go out further into the lake, and let down the nets one more time. Peter protests: "We tried! All night long! There are no fish out there today!"

Wrong, Peter. When Jesus is present, there are *always* plenty of fish, ripe for the catching.

Peter throws his nets out into the water, one more time. The weights start to sink; he pulls the cord taut – *whoa*. He's caught something. He's caught a *lot* of somethings. So many fish, the nets can't even begin hold them all. Peter waves to his partners on the shoreline. *Get in the boat! We need your help!* They fill *both* boats full of fish, and slowly make their way back to shore.

Three of the fishermen recognize: *this didn't happen just by chance*. We wouldn't have caught all those fish on our own. We wouldn't have caught them if we hadn't done what Jesus told us to do.

Peter immediately realizes just how *special* Jesus is. How *holy*. He beholds the majesty of God. "Go away from me, Lord," he says, "for I am a sinful man." Peter thinks he's unworthy to sit in the same boat with Jesus. What had he done, in his past? What kind of jealousies or lusts filled his heart? What kind of false self did he present to the world? When he had a bad night on the water, what did he do to ease his despair? We don't know. Does it matter? He could be any of us. What have *you* done, in *your* past? What darkness has filled *your* heart? Who do you pretend to be, that you aren't? When you have a bad day, what do *you* do, to ease *your* pain? Do you ever feel like *you're* not worthy to sit in the same boat with Jesus? To say, "Don't look too closely at *my* life, Lord – because it's full of sin and shame?"

Jesus doesn't go around looking for perfect people to fill the pews in his church. Or, for that matter, to become *leaders* in his church. There's going to come a time when Jesus says to Peter, "*You* are the rock on which I will build my church." There's going to come a time when Peter will give an inspired speech, and *three thousand people* are going to give their hearts to Jesus, on a single day. There is going to come a time when Peter will testify to his faith in Jesus, and it will cost him his life. But right now, when he's in that boat on the Sea of Galilee, having a conversation with Jesus, surrounded

(literally) by a *boatload* of fish, all Peter sees is his own imperfection. All he knows is “I’m a sinful man.”

This is what the presence of God does. It reminds us how *holy* God is – and how *unworthy* and *undeserving* we are. But no one is so far gone that they cannot be touched and healed at the feet of Jesus. No one has done anything so bad that Jesus cannot love them when they open their heart.

“Don’t be afraid,” says Jesus. “Fear not.” I’m not going to strike you down; I’m not going to kill you, or cast you into the pit of hell. I’m going to *love* you. And I’m going to ask you to follow me. To *work* for me. “From now on,” he says to Peter, “you are going to be catching people.”

Who is this Jesus? Someone who heals and teaches and blesses. Someone who turns an ordinary day into an extraordinary one. Someone who surprises and amazes and loves. He meets us where we are at – in Peter’s case, in his daily life as a fisherman. He loves us despite all our flaws, all our sin. He provides generously for all our needs. (That was a mighty big catch of fish – good enough to last for quite some time.) Then, he invites us to follow him. To *serve* him. To do what *he* bids us to do.

For Peter, it was an easy decision. To go back to the shore, and to leave it all behind. All those nets that occupied so much of his time and attention suddenly didn’t seem so important. He had found something different to do with his time and energy. Something with a greater sense of purpose, something with a deeper sense of meaning. His days as an ordinary fisherman were done.

He becomes a disciple. An apostle. The Catholics say he became the first pope. He still didn’t get it right all the time. Sometimes in the gospels he sounds like a bumbling idiot. On the night when everything went south, he lied about knowing Jesus – *three times*. He was not perfect. Not at all!

And ... neither are we.

There comes a time in each of our journeys when God turns his gaze towards us. We’re out there, in the boat, alone, with him. He asks us to trust him. He asks us to do what he says. When we stop protesting and actually *do* it, we’re blown away. We look at our lives, we realize how messed up they are, we feel like we aren’t sufficiently worthy to be in the presence of God, and yet God looks at us with an *amazing* amount of grace, forgiveness, and love. Then God invites us to serve him, and to share with other people what we have experienced. To help *other* people to know how much God loves *them*.

Today, along the northwest shores of the Sea of Galilee, perhaps at the very beach where this story takes place, there stands a small Franciscan chapel, commemorating the stories about the special place Peter has in the gospel story. At the chapel there is this inscription. It quotes what Peter says, here in Luke 5, when he decides to do what Jesus asks: “At thy word,” says Peter, “I will let down the net.” Then it says: “The deeds and miracles of Jesus are not actions of the past. Jesus is waiting for those who are still prepared to take risks at His word because they trust His power utterly.”

That is our call. To trust the power of Jesus, utterly. To take risks, at his word. To drop our nets, when and where he bids us. When we can do that, we will be utterly *amazed* at what follows.

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