

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

February 6, 2022

Isaiah 6:1-8

Luke 5:1-11

Jesus said, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."

Luke's account of the call of the first disciples differs in its details from the accounts in Matthew and Mark. In both Matthew and Mark, the call seems to come somewhat out of the blue. Jesus walks along, sees some fishermen, and calls them to follow him. Here, there is more context. Chapter 4 of Luke has already told us about Jesus' teaching and subsequent rejection at Nazareth, his first act of healing in the synagogue at Capernaum, and the healing of Simon's mother-in-law. Jesus has begun to get a reputation. Crowds are beginning to follow him. It is likely that Simon is already acquainted with Jesus, or at least knows about him. That would explain his readiness to lend Jesus his boat as a pulpit from which to address the crowd. If Simon knows Jesus, then Jesus also knows Simon, at least a little. This gives Jesus grounds for his suggestion to Simon: "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets."

Simon's response is understandable and justified. "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing!" You can hear the exhaustion, the discouragement, even the scepticism. We have worked all night! For nothing! If you say so... But Simon acknowledges Jesus' authority when he calls him Master. So he says, "If you say so, I will let down the nets." There might be resistance or misunderstanding, but there is also obedience. If you say so, I will do it. What might it look like if we just said that? I don't understand, I'm not at all sure about this, but if you say so, I'll do it.

"The deep" has always been an ambiguous concept. Especially in a desert country, where flash floods could wash away people, homes, and livestock, the torrents of the deep represented an unleashing of the chaos before creation, when the Spirit of God blew over the formless void, or the flood that destroyed all life in the days of Noah. Psalm 69 calls on God for salvation: "Save me, O God, for the waters have risen up to my neck...I have come into deep waters, and the torrent washes over me." My great-nephew Nicky, at the age of four, refused point blank to jump off the dock at the cottage because "There's dangerous things there." Yet, Psalm 42 says, "One deep calls to another in the noise of your cataracts; all your rapids and floods have gone over me," which speaks to me of life-giving revelation. We can spend our time safely splashing in the shallows or we can risk putting out into the unknown. Jesus' mention of "deep water" suggests unexplored potential beyond the known limits of resources, knowledge, and energy.

The result of Simon's willingness is immediate. Suddenly there are more fish than two boats can handle! The importance of the catch is amplified by the details: breaking nets and sinking boats. The act of God is characterized by abundant provision. A large catch of fish represents stability and care. Simon, James, and John and their families will eat tonight. There is enough fish to supply today's needs and more to sell to provide an income for tomorrow. The fish that are sold will

feed the community, so all will be sustained. The abundance of the catch goes beyond Simon and his partners.

If the story ended here, it would be a good story about the abundance of God's provision. But it goes on. Jesus tells the disciples they are being called. In some ways, their work will be similar – they will still be catching, but people, not fish. The climax of the story is the call, not the abundance. From now on, they will gather people with the message about Jesus. Just as the first crowds were drawn by the magnetism of Jesus, so will future believers be attracted to him, to his teaching and his healing power, to his person.

In between the catch and the call, though, is Simon's response. "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" By calling Jesus "Lord", Simon acknowledges not just Jesus' authority, but his divinity. And he prostrates himself at Jesus' feet. His response is like Isaiah's – a recognition of sinfulness and unworthiness. While Isaiah receives his vision during an experience of worship in the Temple and has his sin purged by a burning coal – better him than me! – Simon receives his call in the course of an ordinary workday with the reassurance, "Don't be afraid." The call of Simon and his partners is similar to Isaiah's because there is an awareness of holiness; it is different because the fishermen who are called are not "special" in any way. Simon, James, and John follow Jesus because he himself and his message are intrinsically attractive. He is displaying Messianic signs of God's reign and they want to be part of what he is going to do. He gives them a vision of a new way of being human, in relationship with God and in community with others, and they want to be part of it. When Jesus tells Simon that from now on, he will be catching people, he is not commissioning him to be an evangelist. He is inviting him to become an active partner in a pilgrimage. "Fishing for people" is not coercive or domineering. It is personal and relational. This is deep water work.

The fishermen walk away from a secure future – a full boat and all it represents. It is different than simply walking away from Zebedee, as in Matthew and Mark, or away from John the Baptist, as in John's gospel. The fact they leave their wealth behind is testimony to the importance of what just happened. They don't just leave the nets, leave their boats. Luke says they left everything and followed. They don't know what will come next, what danger they might be in because the attention of the authorities has surely been attracted, what further sacrifices they will have to make. But something about this Jesus makes the risks worthwhile.

What do we know about Jesus that can give meaning to this call, not just to the first disciples, but to us weary ones in 2022? We are exhausted, we are discouraged, we are tired of going back and forth from the shallows to the deep water, from hope to resignation. We are tired of how COVID has changed how we live, how we do ministry, how we can plan anything, how we measure success or what success even means. We are tired of questions and differences being hijacked by political agendas, especially those that espouse hateful, racist, homophobic, anti-Semitic, and Islamophobic rhetoric. Against these increasingly noisy gongs and clanging cymbals (and honking

horns) and so much that is unknown, we do know Jesus calls us to share his message of God's love and welcome for all, regardless of external differences, regardless of unworthiness, regardless of sinfulness. We need to hear that message for ourselves as well as for others whom he calls us to invite into his movement.

We are perhaps used to thinking of the idea of call or vocation as it pertains to ordained ministry. Certainly, anyone who offers themselves for that ministry must explore and explain where their sense of call comes from and what it means to them. But Jesus himself was a lay person in the religion of his day, and he called lay people – ordinary men and women – to be partners with him in his movement of healing, caring, and liberating. Each one of us is called to join this unlikely company, called within by the wonder of God's presence, and called from without by Jesus' admonition, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." And there will be provision, even in times of exhaustion and depletion and seeming scarcity. God will see to that.

Lord of the deep waters,
you call us from the safety of the shore
to an adventure of the spirit:
open wide our arms
to embrace the world you dare to serve;
through Jesus Christ, who gives life in abundance. Amen.
(Steven Shakespeare, Prayers for an Inclusive Church, p. 84)