

5 Epiphany  
Luke 5:1-11  
February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
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Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he 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. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

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When I was a little kid, we lived on the side of a Montana mountain with nothing but a gravel road separating our house from slopes of wheatgrass, prairiesmoke, sage and bitterroot that ran up to stands of Ponderosa and Doug fir. My Dad's family raised cattle in Eastern Montana and my Mom's family lived in Bozeman, right there on the knees of the Rocky Mountains. So even though we went to St. Peter's Episcopal cathedral on Sunday mornings, the first religion I was taught with any depth was, of course, fly fishing.

As with any ancient religion, I was instructed in the faith not by my father, but by my elders—my grandfather and my great uncles. Mostly, by my great-uncle Paul. (It's good to learn religion from someone named Paul.) And the fly-fishing gospel according to Paul Wylie starts with this: "It ain't about catchin' fish."

I'm inclined to notice some crossover: Luke's story about Jesus and a group of commercial fishermen also ain't about catchin' fish. There are some details in this story – some odd points that just don't make sense if the story was intended to be about fish.

First, Jesus tells Simon to put out into the deep water. The problem, as people living around the Galilee will tell you, is that tilapia, the fish that live in the Galilee, prefer the shallows where the water is warmer. Now, we might let that slide because the fishing nets that Simon and the Zebedee boys had on board were not designed to go deep anyway.

That doesn't resolve the next oddity that shows up immediately.

Simon tells Jesus that they have been working all night long. That's because the way that his crews work is to wait until night when the fish are feeding. They suspended lamps over the water to gather fish to a central area on the lake surface where they can more easily be netted. Fishing in daylight is an exercise in futility.

And Simon's crews have just spent the entire night working and the better part of the day cleaning and repairing nets, a task that took several hours. They have been away from their homes and families long enough, and these experienced professionals got skunked after all their work. This new rabbi, Jesus, clearly knows nothing about the best practices for catching fish.

Now, we can certainly leave room for the possibility that this story involves a suspension of the natural order, a miracle. And yet, there remains one last detail that is the most compelling evidence that Luke's story is not – at least not *mainly* – concerned with fish.

Two boats loaded so full that they are near sinking finally make it to shore, where James, John and Simon and probably a few others leave the catch and everything else. After that astonishing miracle or dumb luck or something amazing, they leave an enormous and lucrative harvest sitting out in the Galilean sun. We don't get to hear who processed the profitable catch. And the boys don't seem to care who cleaned and repaired the nets for a second time, a task that took several hours.

We don't hear these details because the fish are secondary. This story ain't about catchin' fish. Luke's story is about something else.

And if we don't let ourselves get distracted there are other clues in the details. Listen again to Simon's first words in Luke's story: "Master," Simon says. Now, remember, Simon has recently seen Jesus cure his mother-in-law of a severe fever and was likely present when Jesus cured other sicknesses and drove demons from people.

"Master," Simon says, "we labored all through the night and took in nothing; but on your word, I will let down the nets." There is an echo here – an echo of Mary's conversation with the angel in Luke's annunciation story. "How shall this be, as I have intimacy with no man?" Mary objected, but then she said, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; let it happen to me as you have said."

There's a theme through Luke; a theme of reversals. Luke casts Mary and Simon, as models of a specific kind of reversal – the change of mind called *metanoia*. Jesus will later re-name Simon "Peter, the Rock" and Luke will show us Peter's new life in the Acts of the Apostles. Here we see

the first glimpses of Peter's slowly developing realization of who this man, Jesus, actually is.

Two boatloads full of fish caught in the daylight after a frustrating night of hard work was amazing. No question. It's even possible that some people chose to leave everything and follow Jesus simply because of the catch. Possible, but not likely.

Because to leave everything meant more than just boats, nets and gear. Peter, James and John left family, friends and patrons. They left their entire social network, livelihood and security. This behavior in the ancient world was seriously deviant and their families and friends would have found it far more traumatic than if they had just walked away from their jobs.

Peter and his friends did, in fact, put out into the deep. They must have seen something in Jesus that they could not get by staying where and as they were. Something more than fish. Something that dropped Peter to his knees in recognition of his Master. "Go from me, Lord," he says, "for I am a sinful man."

It would be easy, I suppose, to attribute Peter's confession to a certain lack of self-confidence, not unlike we heard from Isaiah. Maybe Peter was even aware of the prophet's cry: "Woe is me; I am lost! For I am a man of unclean lips," a man, that is, who speaks sinfully, "and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have beheld seen the King Lord of hosts!"

Isaiah is afraid that he will die because, in the ancient mind, that was the fate of an unworthy person who saw God. And then a seraph, one of the angelic beings who still call "Holy, holy, holy!" to each other, acted to blot out the prophet's sin and then reassured him that he was safe.

Jesus calmed Peter, saying: "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be capturing people." Not "your guilt has been blotted out," or even "you are forgiven," which may seem strange given that Peter has openly claimed to be a sinner. And Jesus does forgive sin. Just not right here in this moment.

Instead, he says only "Do not be afraid."

He gives no command to follow, requires no oath of loyalty, insists on no guarantee of compliance. That's more like the way many earthly leaders operate. Peter, James and John run a business with their fathers. And so they are likely accustomed to fear and control as primary qualities of leadership. What they encounter in Jesus is not like anything they have known.

What works in running commercial fishing crews is not the same as what works in captivating people. And remember, the crowd that gathered on the shore of the Galilee is there not for a miracle, but to hear the word of God.

And in later stories, Luke's Jesus will teach the importance of hearing the word of God and then putting it into practice.

And so, if we put words to the actions that captured the hearts, mind and souls of Peter and his friends, what Jesus *showed* them might be interpreted something like this: "Look, I know that you are worried about taking care of your families and friends. So...here. Here are hundreds of fish and there are still more to come.

"There is something beyond that. The fish that you catch will be taken against whatever will they have. They will suffocate, be gutted, sold and eaten. Life and death work that way. I am exposing you to something bigger and larger than anything any of you have ever imagined."

"Watch how I live. Listen to what I say. You can choose to come with me. You will breathe new life with your hearts filled with love, your souls liberated and fed. God works that way. You will experience the unimaginable and life-changing grace of God."

Luke's story, you see, is really not just about fish. When Luke's Jesus tells Simon Peter that he will capture people, he uses a word used only once in Christian scripture – a word that means to "capture alive." And so, this story is about what it is like to experience being "captured." Like Peter, James and John, we are gathered in this place because we have been captured alive. But the word implies something more: We have seen and heard and have been *captivated* by the presence of Christ.

And so, we naturally follow Jesus the Anointed, each in our own way and together as a community. Not by reneging all our responsibilities or by walking out on loved ones. Following Jesus is not complete disengagement from the life we have been given; not emotional detachment from the people in our lives.

Following Christ involves non-attachment. And so, go create wealth without being owned by money. Love your family and friends without letting them run the life that God gave you. Enjoy and appreciate material things without giving them charge over your body or your mind or your heart.

Now, it's true that we are sinners to a person, but it is also true that there's more to each of our stories. Something larger. And, yes, something more amazing than two boatloads of fish. Don't be afraid. Because of who you are in Christ and who Christ is in you, *you* will be captivating!

Put Christ first, then do what you know how to do. When we do that, God uses all the resources God has put within us and around us to capture others alive into the kingdom of God.

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