

Miracle, Call, and New Life

Sermon by Pastor Patricia Geiseman

Epiphany 5

February 9-10, 2019

Luke 5:1-11

Like a lot of people, I read reviews for just about everything: recipes, books, clothes, anti-aging serum, and films. I read the positives, then the negatives, and then make my own decision. Sometimes my experience differs from the reviewers, such as when a wildly popular film leaves my mind wandering and waiting for the end. But almost always reading ahead of time is a benefit.

Even without the internet, news about Jesus spread fast throughout Galilee. Reading through the first four chapters of Luke, so far, I would say Jesus has four stars. Overall, people have been amazed. You will recall the list: those who heard the shepherds' story, Jesus' parents listening to old Simeon in the temple, the men in the Temple listening to twelve-year-old Jesus' questions, those who listened to a thirty-year-old Jesus read from Isaiah, and the crowd who witnessed the healing of the demon possessed man. From the time of his birth to the beginning of his ministry, there is a lot of amazement over Jesus' words and actions.

The only negative reviews so far would be from the people in Jesus' hometown who took exception to his reminder that the net of God's abundance included foreigners.

By Luke chapter 5, Jesus has a following. The crowds are pressing in on him. Jesus needed some space. So, just before today's Gospel lesson, he departed for a deserted place to be alone. I wonder, in this time by himself (which didn't last long), did Jesus pray for a little help? I bet he did. So far, his ministry was a solo call. Even though he was, as Luke tells us, filled with the Spirit, Jesus was, humanly speaking, alone in his mission. The crowds were pressing in on him. Clinging to him. And why not? Healing power is very attractive.

Jesus needed a team.

In the olden days our story was called "The Miraculous Draught of Fishes." It is that and much more. Biblical narratives, like films, have categories. Sometimes more than one, Popular film categories include: Action, Adventure, Drama, Comedy, Crime, Thriller, Fantasy, and Romance. Knowing the category ahead of time aligns our expectations of what the film will be about. The most popular genres are Adventure and Action. But I read that last year, the favorite genre was Comedy. I guess Americans needed a lift!

Last fall I put off seeing the Spike Lee film "Blackkklansman," partly because the categories were listed as Drama *and* Comedy. (Films with multiple genres make the

most money!) I thought, how could anything even a biographical story about the Klan be the least bit funny?

But because the reviews were so high (95% on Rotten Tomatoes), I saw the film anyway. It was dramatic and jarring. The humor was dark. The kind I notice but don't laugh at. Mostly, what wasn't funny is that this story of racism took place while I was in college ... clueless in my mostly white, liberal arts, Lutheran place of learning.

Our Gospel story for today is dense with meaningful metaphor and layered with collaborative categories. This story of Simon and Jesus by the Sea is a Nature Miracle: where there were no fish, now there is abundance. And, this is a Call story: Simon is invited to follow Jesus, to work with him in his ministry. This can be understood as a Resurrection story, too. The Miraculous Catch of Fish is recorded as a post-resurrection story in John 21. Even though Luke places it in the beginning, it tells of new life. The Gospel narrative is one of Miracle, Call, and New Life.

Jesus and Simon already know each other. Maybe even pretty well. Earlier Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law, whose recovery was so speedy she got right up and served supper! No wonder Simon agreed to let Jesus borrow one of his boats to teach from. It is possible that Simon could see for himself that Jesus needed a bit of space. And, it is from this space—not far from the shore—that Jesus could see what Simon needed.

After a whole night of fishing, the nets were empty. Hours of work, and nothing. Jesus invited Simon to go back out into the deep water and let down his nets.

Simon may have thought, 'Are you kidding?' But he answered, "If you say so."

Simon tried again. There were so many fish that the mended nets were ready to break, and Simon needed another boat.

This is much more than "once upon a time" Jesus was amazing.

The *abundance of fish* is a living and lasting metaphor for the presence and power of God in our sometimes turbulent, chaotic, and empty lives.

In the Bible "deep water" was a metaphor for primordial chaos. Luke perceived his world as chaos: hostility between traditional Judaism and the followers of Jesus, the repressive behavior of the Roman Empire, and conflict within the church.

We know about the deep water of chaos in our own lives and world. National politics, relationships among races and ethnic communities, international relationships and many other places closer to home.^[1] Still, white men wear white hoods.

There are times in our lives when there is tension and turmoil around us and within us. We may feel as we are in deep churning water. And running out of treading energy. Like Simon, many in the world experience the chaos of emptiness.

For millions of people, nets really are empty. We know that 10% of the world's population lives in extreme poverty. Everyday 15,000 children die from preventable diseases. Even though the numbers are improving, the chaos of not having enough continues.

And even though we have freezers and pantries full of food, overflowing closets and drawers, vitamins, medicines and professional health care, and good schools for our children, we experience emptiness. This happens within our homes and our relationships. At work and at school.

It may even be embarrassing to feel empty when we have so much. But we can and we do.

Sometimes the changes in our lives leave us feeling a void. Our roles and relationships change. There are times in life's waters we lack meaning, purpose, direction, and hope. Sometimes our efforts feel like Simon's.

All night for nothing. We may not be rocking in a first-century boat over deep water, but sometimes at three a.m., we feel like it. Our soul is in a dark place. We can feel resentful, numb to the feelings of love, isolated and anxious.

Our consumer culture capitalizes on feelings like emptiness, promising us fulfillment with this or that product. We try to fill our empty nets and calm our churning souls with food, alcohol, weed, shopping, the internet, social media, binge watching. We waste time, energy, and money on stuff that will never fill our net of need.

In the chaos of our culture, we can have too much worry and work, anxiety and anger, and too little peace and wellness, joy and gratitude. We get caught in the swirl of the deep water, like little fish that can't get out.

My growing-up pastor wore a black suit and a black clerical shirt, every day. On the lapel he wore a gold fishhook. Even as a second grader, I knew it referred to this story and the invitation to Simon to join Jesus and fish for people. But the sharp hook?

Really? Who would ever want to be on the end of that? Fish for people?

The Miracle story is also an invitation to participate in Divine Abundance. Jesus came to bring the good news of God's kingdom, God's realm of abundance and healing, hope and freedom, food and real relationship.

Jesus needed a team, and he invited Simon to join him for real life, right now.

“From now on you will be catching people” (Luke 5:10). “Catch” here could be translated “rescue.” People are not caught for consumption but for redemption. For life! Jesus was inviting Simon, and because the story is larger and lasting, *Jesus is inviting us to be part of his mission* to rescue people from the chaos of hopelessness and futility, to new life.

The fish was a popular symbol for the early church. It was more common than the cross. The Greek word for fish, ICHTHUS, are the first letters for the words Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Savior. It was a secret way of identifying oneself as a follower of Jesus. Still, we see this symbol.

Tertullian, a second-century church father wrote: “But we, little fishes, after our Fish, Jesus Christ, are born in the water of baptism.”

In the New Testament fish are symbols of God’s abundance. Fish = Food. Whenever we read about fish in the Gospels, we are reading about the miracle of sustenance. [2] Remember in John’s Gospel the boy who shared his lunch of bread and fish, and it became enough for everyone?

At St. Mark’s, we are a confessional church, connected to the promises of God lived through the ministry of Jesus and through the apostolic tradition. We are little fishes joined in the waters of Baptism, committed to the Divine intention of Enough for Everyone. We share in Jesus’ vision from the borrowed boat. We open our eyes to see the weary, empty, and hopeless ones.

Through our ministries within the congregation, the community and the wider church, we go back out into the deep water and let down our nets.

Even in the deep waters of the world’s chaos—in despair and doubts, fatigue and failure—we try again.

And when we do, there is New Life!

And we are amazed.

Amen.

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At the close of the sermon, Pastor Geiseman read the prayer “I praise you for what is yet possible” by Ted Loder. The essence of the prayer is that we can offer praise not only “for what has been or for what is, but for what is yet to be.” May we go with Jesus “to the edge of now and maybe” to see our possibilities, to live to the “limits of passion and compassion,” and “uncurl to God’s kingdom coming.” [3]

Resources:

[1] Allen, Ronald J., "Luke 5:1-11 Commentary," workingpreacher.org, February 10, 2019.

[2] Eaton, Peter. "Luke 5:1-11," *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 1: Advent through Transfiguration*, Westminster John Knox Press, pg 333.

[3] Loder, Ted. "I Praise You for What Is Yet To Be," *Guerrillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle*, Augsburg Books, 20th Anniversary Edition, 2005.

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Reflection questions

- *Where do you see, feel, or fear chaos in your life or in the world?*
- *When have your nets seemed empty? When have you felt out of energy, hope, purpose, or direction?*
- *What has "trying again" looked like in your life?*
- *When have you experienced amazement at restored hope and renewed strength to keep going? New fullness?*