

Sermon, Epiphany 5C, 2-10-19, Jane A. Beebe

“On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul.” (Psalm 138:3)

Luke is a master at compelling narrative and visual detail. Every part of today’s Gospel reading reveals something important. It is as if Jesus is taking us on a journey, bit by bit drawing us into the scene as it unfolds.

5:1 Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God,

As the scene opens, Luke tells us that Jesus is standing by the lake. The Lake of Gennesaret is also known as the Sea of Galilee. Jesus is preaching and teaching as is his wont. But the crowd is pressing in so that they can hear. It as if by getting as close as possible, they can absorb more of Jesus’ presence. They may not even know what it is they are waiting to hear or see. I do not think their “pressing in” on Jesus as meant to be menacing. They are simply drawn in to his teaching, hanging on every word. With compassion, Jesus looks around to see how he might accommodate the crowd.

It must be first thing in the morning. The fishermen have brought their boats to shore. They are in the middle of the chore of cleaning their nets, getting rid of whatever scales and detritus may have been caught in them. We are told that there are two boats, and they, too, are right on the shore. We do not know if the

fishermen are listening to Jesus as they work. So far, they seem to be merely on the periphery of the scene, minding their own business.

5:3 [Jesus] 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.

In order to be better seen and heard by the crowd, Jesus gets into the boat, a kind of floating pulpit. Luke chooses to tell us it is the boat belonging to Simon. By naming Simon, Luke brings him into the foreground. I wonder here, if Simon is already in Jesus' mind as a possible disciple? Jesus asks Simon to put the boat out a little way from the shore. Jesus sits in the boat, and continues to teach the gathered crowd. Note that the scene begins on dry land. Now the main protagonists have left the shore behind.

5:4 When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."

At this point we might expect Jesus and Simon to come back to shore, stay in the shallows, or continue on their way. Yet Jesus makes an unexpected suggestion to Simon, "Put out into the deep water..." For me, there is a strong echo of Genesis in Jesus' words. "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep..." Is this what Jesus is pointing Simon towards? Or perhaps this line from

Psalm 42: “Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me.” (Psalm 42:7)

In Jesus’ time deep water—especially during storms—was something to be feared. Deep water represented chaos, even destruction. Yet Jesus says, “Put out in the deep water...” I believe Jesus is deliberately pointing his potential disciples—and us—to the generative, creative power of the beginning of Creation. If we want to be Jesus’ disciples, we have to leave shore. Yet Jesus is there in the boat *with* the fishermen. A place of potential fear is transformed by Jesus’ presence into a place of new life, new hope. Brother Curtis Almquist of SSJE wrote this, and I think it is true. “Hope is something that rests deeper in the water than what happens on the stormy surface of life.” Hope can seem fragile or fleeting. Yet, like faith and love, it abides—perhaps *especially* in the deep places.

5:5 Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."

I can hear the exhaustion in Simon’s voice, can’t you? Who among us hasn’t labored long and hard at something, maybe even into the night, only to come up short? Simon hasn’t been given his new name of Simon Peter, just yet. Peter is my favorite disciple. (You’ve probably heard me say this before). There is something about Peter’s forthright honesty, his willingness to try to go the distance even if he fails, and his sincere love for his Rabbi that draws me in—even as I might be

shaking my head at him. Jesus has already asked that they enter deep water, a dicey proposition. Now he wants Simon to let down the nets. This is daytime: *not* the best time to fish. I can almost hear Simon saying under his breath, “It’s not going to work...” Yet Simon is willing to try. The literal Greek says, “On account of your word, I will let down the nets.” We may not want to listen when someone wiser than we are suggests a different way—even when we know our way isn’t working. So I give Peter a lot of credit.

5:6 When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break.

Once again, as in the wedding at Cana, the source of the miracle is not readily apparent. We do not see what Jesus actually does. Is it simply in Jesus’ presence in the boat with them? Or maybe it has something to do with Peter’s and the other fishermen’s willingness, their obedience. Or both together? The fishermen do not simply catch enough fish, a normal haul. There are so many the nets begin to break. God’s creative impulse seems to know no bounds. I think of that wonderful chapter in Isaiah that begins, “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that

which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.” (Isaiah 55:1-2)

5:7 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.

This week as I meditated on this passage, it is this verse that became my favorite. I am not sure I had noted this detail of the story before. There is a second boat. At Simon’s signal it comes to the rescue. Luke does not tell us how many fishermen Simon has with him in the boat along with Jesus, but I assume his partners James and John may also be with them. Nonetheless, it is clear they cannot manage the nets on their own. In my mind’s eye, the boats come around so that they are on either side of the nets. They grasp the nets and try to haul up the catch, but even the boats begin to sink under the weight. The sigh of relief I made at their seeming imminent rescue turns to anxiety once more.

5:8 But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

I think Simon Peter is to be forgiven for his reaction. It has all become too much. He is overcome with the reality that he is in the presence of God. This is holy ground of the terrifying kind. At the very least the appropriate response is to hide our faces, take off our sandals, and fall to the ground. We can see now why this passage appears for us late in Epiphany. God’s glory breaks through even in

the midst of everyday work, like fishing. This is akin to the reaction of the shepherds in the field when the angels appear to announce Jesus' birth. As the KJV says, "They were sore afraid." Simon does not feel worthy—or even very safe.

5:9 For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; 5:10 and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who are partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people."

Do not be afraid. God gives us this reassurance over and over again in Scripture. I am so grateful for God's patience, for God's willingness to repeat those words of comfort whenever they are needed. Brother Curtis pointed out another truth to me. "Fear is not a sign of the *absence* of God. In our fear we rather find the bidding *presence* of God. Our fear most often arises out of something that is bigger than we are... and we find that in and of ourselves, there isn't enough—not enough energy, or patience, or hope, or encouragement, or provision. We come up short. And we're afraid that our boat is going to sink."

And now for Jesus' most astonishing words of all: "From now on you will be catching people." More than one commentary said that the sense of the word "people" here is persons that are *alive*. This is Jesus' promise not only of an abundant life, but a *resurrected* life for the disciples and all whom they encounter. Jesus invites us to leave shore, venture out into the deep, risk sinking, so that we may live.

5:11 When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Part of me wonders what happened to that amazing catch of fish. I'd like to think it was the beginning, for the disciples, of what it could mean to share what they had learned. I love that they carefully brought the boats to shore before leaving them behind. Maybe they left them for us, so we, too, can go boating.