

“Fishing for People”

Luke 5:1-11

There are a lot of fish stories in the Bible. Jonah is probably the most familiar, the prophet who spends three days in the belly of a fish before being given a second chance to follow God’s call. What we hear today, the calling of the first disciples and the miraculous catch of fish, though, is probably a close second. In order to understand and think about this familiar story, though, I want us to think of three words. Those words are faith, fear, and follow.

The first word is faith. Of course it takes a lot of faith to drop everything and follow Jesus. But as we look closer, we see that, for Peter, there wasn’t just one giant step of faith, but was instead a series of smaller steps. The first step of faith is that Peter puts out his boat so Jesus can teach from it. He didn’t have to do that. He’d been out fishing all night, and had nothing to show for it. He was tired and sore, finishing the required maintenance on the nets. Yet when Jesus asks him to put the boat out, he does.

The second step of faith is in trusting Jesus when he tells them to take the boat out to the deeper water and lower their nets for a catch. They’d fished all night with nothing to show for it. What did this son of a carpenter, this itinerant preacher and teacher, know about fishing? Yet Peter takes a step of faith. “At your word, I will lower the nets.” He takes the boat back out to the deeper water, lowers the net, and a miracle happens. Those little steps of faith lead to a big catch, and lay the foundation for an even bigger step of faith.

The miraculous catch of fish is proof that the catch isn’t from Peter’s efforts. If it were, he wouldn’t have empty nets to show for a night’s work! But instead, the miraculous catch of fish is proof that Jesus is someone different than

anyone else Peter has met. It’s proof of God’s provision. It validates Peter’s faith.

The next word is fear. Peter is afraid. At first, he’s afraid that he doesn’t have a catch to show for his night’s work. He’s afraid he won’t be able to provide for himself, for his family, for his partners. Then, after Jesus sends them out to deep water again and they start drawing up the overflowing nets, he’s afraid that the nets will break, and the boats will sink, due to the miraculous catch of fish. But even more, he’s afraid to be in the presence of someone who can do what Jesus does. He’s afraid to be in the presence of the holy God.

We see that in the Isaiah reading, as well. Isaiah knows his sin, and knows he has no right to be in the presence of the holy God. God’s holiness should drive away any sin, any sinner. In contrast to that attitude, Isaiah knows that he’s not worthy to approach the throne of God. He knows what happens to people who rush in where angels fear to tread. When God appears to him, Isaiah is frightened. He cries out, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.” The holiness of God makes Isaiah aware of his own unholiness. Isaiah is purified, made holy enough to be in the presence of God.

Jesus tells Peter not to be afraid. Jesus responds to Peter’s confession of sin not with forgiveness but with comfort and with purpose. “Do not be afraid.” This isn’t judgment; it is mercy. “From now on you will be catching people.” Jesus doesn’t deny what Peter is – a fisherman – he enlarges it, meeting Peter where he is at and, rather than condemning him, expanding his

vision, drawing him into God's kingdom vision of who and what Peter might be.

Now, don't be afraid is one of the most common commands in the Bible. One source notes that it occurs 366 times, once for each day of the year, including leap year! It's the most common command because being in the presence of God is a frightening thing. Often, when God calls someone, when an angel appears to someone, it's a sign that something strange is going to happen. The call often comes with great changes. People uproot their whole lives in order to follow God's call. But with the call comes God's promises and presence. We don't have to be afraid because God promises to be with us.

That leads us to our last word. Follow. Peter, James, and John leave everything behind to follow Jesus. God called Peter, Andrew, James and John and turned their fishing for fish into fishing for people, using the same work ethic they had as fishermen to prepare them for the long, hard work of being disciples and discipling others.

They will follow Jesus, but this is not the end of their journey. It's only the beginning. As we've spent the last couple weeks looking at Peter in the Sunday Bible class, we've seen that Peter will have moments of great faith, and moments of great doubt. He's the one who gives the great confession of faith, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God!" Yet a few short verses later, he's trying to talk Jesus out of the necessity of the cross, and gets told to get behind me, Satan. He's the one who has the faith to walk on water, yet starts to sink when he takes his eyes off of Jesus. Peter is the one who says he will never abandon Jesus, and even shows his resolve by cutting off a servant's ear when Jesus is arrested, yet later denies Jesus three times.

This is also a time of great fear. Wars and rumors of war continue to come. Anxiety about the economy and workplaces continue, as well as fear of the pandemic that's been with us over two years. Fear sells, and as the midterm elections start ramping up, we'll hear more reasons to be afraid of what will happen if the other party or the other candidate is elected. Yet Jesus tells us to not be afraid. We are sent out into the world not to make people afraid, but to share the hope that we have. We don't behave rashly, but we don't live in fear, either. We trust in God's promises. We rejoice in God's presence with us, as we experience God with us in tangible ways as we join together in Holy Communion and hear God's word of promise and forgiveness.

Finally, we follow. We continue to learn what it means to be caught by God. Jesus calls us to "catch people"--that is, to seek out relationship with people and invite them into the community we share in Christ. It's often easy for us to be in relationship with people we know--friends and family, neighbors across the street, people who share our values. But the call to "catch people" draws us out of ourselves and into the unknown--perhaps to listen to someone who does not share our political views or to accompany a friend who is wrestling with questions of faith.

Following Jesus isn't easy, though, and never has been. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that "[w]hen Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die." Jesus showed his disciples that when He went to the cross to die for the sins of the whole world, for all the sinful people, all the people with unclean lips, everyone. And after He rose on Easter morning, Jesus went and found His disciples, who were back fishing for fish. He called them again, caught them again,

and sent them out again, to catch people for God.

We, too, have been called and caught by God. Drawn through water at Baptism, we are called to catch people, too. God continues to catch us. Sometimes, it's to be caught in our sin and see our need for a Savior. Other times, God catches us when we fall, are lonely or afraid, bringing us out of the depths into the light. And God uses us to catch others. And so, we step forward in faith. We face our fears. And we follow Jesus, the one who continues to call us to follow him.

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