

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Isaiah 6:1-8 (NRSV)

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. [2] Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. [3] And one called to another and said:

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory."

[4] The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. [5] And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"

[6] Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. [7] The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." [8] Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

Luke 5:1-11 (NRSV)

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, [2] he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. [3] 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. [4] When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." [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." [6] When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. [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. [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!" [9] For he and all who were with him were amazed at

the catch of fish that they had taken; [10] 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." [11] When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

FISHING FOR MEN AND WOMEN

The key verse in our lesson from Luke is verse 10 when Jesus says, "There is no reason to fear; from now on you will be fishing for men and women." (Luke 5:10 Msg.) This verse gives us our clue when it comes to interpreting our passage for today. This story is more than a really big fish story. It's a story about who Jesus is and how He calls men and women to be His disciples.

Has Jesus called you to go fishing for men and women? Many of us might be tempted to say "no." We think that the only calls worth noting are special calls, a call to the professional ministry or perhaps a call to the mission field.

But, this passage suggests otherwise.

Jesus called ordinary people doing ordinary jobs to become his disciples. The only qualification any of them ever needed was the courage to simply leave the old way of life behind and go where Jesus told them to go.

A PRESSING PROBLEM

In our lesson for today, Jesus had a pressing problem. This crowd that followed him was evidently not Presbyterian; they didn't struggle to fill up the back pews. They didn't want to listen to Jesus from a comfortable distance.

They crowded around him in order to better hear what he had to say. They wanted to touch him and be touched by him.

This was not the first time this would happen. In Mark's gospel we read that sometimes so many people crowded around Jesus and his disciples that they didn't even have a chance to eat.

In this case, because so many were intent on getting close to Jesus, many others were not able to get close or hear what he had to say. Their actions prevented the proclamation of the gospel, and so Jesus needed to get some distance from the crowd.

And that was when Jesus noticed two boats tied up on the shore of the lake. The fishermen had just left the boats and were washing their nets. (We'll learn later that this was after a long and unsuccessful night of fishing.)

Jesus jumps in one of the boats and asks Simon to put out a little way from shore. In this way he can use the boat as a pulpit and preach his sermon without the crowd mauling him like a rock star.

Like many stories in the Bible I'm often intrigued by what we don't know.

In this case I wonder why Simon was willing to go along with having his boat commandeered in this way.

He's worn out from a bad fishing trip, and he has to get his nets clean before he goes fishing again.

When you've got your own small business you don't get paid unless you produce.

And now he's surrounded by a crowd and some guy who wants to use his boat for who knows what.

But, the Bible doesn't tell us anything about that.

We simply learn that Simon did what Jesus wanted him to do.

He put out a little way from shore so Jesus could preach to the people.

PUT DOWN YOUR NETS

And when Jesus finished preaching to the crowds, he had another request for Simon. He said, "Push out into deep water and let your nets out for a catch."

Be warned. This is what happens when you let Jesus in your boat. You are floating happily near the shore and before you know it he is asking you to push out into deeper water. He is asking you to get in over your head, to go places and do things that you would never have done on your own.

Simon doesn't know just how deep the water really is ... nor does he understand the importance of what he is about to do. Simon is still smarting from last night's defeat. He says,

“Lord, we've been fishing all night ... a much better time to fish than now I might add ... and we caught nothing. But, because you want us to go fishing, we'll go fishing. I'll put the nets down one more time.”

You cannot blame Simon for his less than enthusiastic response. We might not know what it is to fish all night long, but we do know what it is to work hard all day and have everything go wrong. Sometimes our work brings nothing but weariness and sense of futility. What we don't want after a hard day is someone asking us to just try a little harder, to put our nets out just one more time.

But, I would suggest that if Jesus asks us to put our nets out just one more time, it might be worth a try. It certainly worked out for Simon ... or at least it seemed to work out for him.

MORE THAN A FISH STORY

No sooner than he had put out his nets, the nets began to fill with fish. In fact the nets were so full that they began to break under the strain. Simon yelled for his compatriots on shore to bring the other boat. They came and it wasn't long before both boats were filled with fish.

In fact the boats were filled with too much fish. The Bible says that the boats actually began to sink ... far from shore in the deep water. And that's when it struck them.

This was about more than a fishing trip. This was about power like they had never seen before. This Jesus was more than just a good speaker ... much

more. Like Isaiah in the temple, Simon had gotten a glimpse of God's glory. And he was scared out of his wits.

Literally the Greek means that he and his fellow fishermen were gripped by fear.

Jesus would later rename Simon. He would call him Peter which means rock. Well Simon Peter was certainly feeling rock like today. He was sinking fast just like a rock, and it wasn't just because of the excess fish.

In the presence of Jesus Simon was overwhelmed with a sense of the holy. Simon was acutely aware of his sinfulness. Like Isaiah before him Simon saw himself as a man of unclean lips who lived among a people of unclean lips.

GET OUT OF HERE JESUS!

This epiphany did not bring, at least at first, a sense of joy and hope and all things bright and beautiful. The sight of God's power made Simon shake in his boots, and he wanted Jesus to leave.

Simon tells Jesus, "Get out of here." The literal translation of the Greek is "Get out of my neighborhood."

We might say that we want to go fishing with Jesus that we want to push out into deep water and catch a boatload of fish. But, when the fish start swamping the boat and the boat starts to sink, and we realize that Jesus had gotten us in over our head ... then like Simon Peter our faith is overcome by fear.

We're not worthy Jesus. Pick on someone else who is more qualified. Get out of our neighborhood.

Once again, as it often happens in the Bible, the miracle doesn't produce faith. The miracle produces fear and confusion.

Whenever people are confronted with the power of God in Jesus Christ, how do they respond? Quite often they respond with fear.

Do you remember the response of the shepherds when they saw the glory of God and the heavenly host proclaiming the birth of Christ? They were (as the King James Version of the Bible puts it) “sore afraid.”

Do you remember how the disciples responded when confronted by the news of the resurrection and the presence of the risen Christ?

They were afraid. They were scared to death. Throughout the Bible the story is the same. The Epiphany brings fear and uncertainty.

DISCIPLESHIP AND DEEP WATER

And the same will be true for us as well. Don't think that discipleship begins with certainty and strength. It doesn't.

Discipleship begins in deep water. Discipleship begins with anxiety that threatens to overwhelm us and a ship that is sinking. Discipleship begins when with a mixture of guilt and fear we tell Jesus, “Get out of here. Leave me alone.”

Today I ask you. Are you in deep water? Are you in over your head? Is there something in your life that is overwhelming you? Do you just want it all to stop? Have you reached the point when you just want to tell Jesus, “Get out of here?”

Hear the words that are spoken again and again in Scripture. Our Lord tells Peter, and he tells us, “Don't be afraid. I'm going to transform your life. I'm going to help you through this time of fear and lead you places you would have never dreamed of going.

Your story is about more than fish; your story is about more than just making a living. It's about making a life.”

Do you know what Jesus is really asking when he asks you to go fishing in the deep water? He's asking you to trust Him more than you trust your fears. He asking you to trust him enough to leave the shallow places of your life and begin to explore the depths.

We would be content to live our whole life playing around on the seashore like children making sandcastles. But, we were made for more than that.

The Bible reminds us that it is our destiny to mature as Christians, to become more Christ like in our demeanor, thoughts and actions. (Ephesians 4:15-16)

Jesus tells us even today,

“Go into the deep water.
Trust me and see what happens.”

DEEP WATER FOR A PASTOR

A pastor told of a meeting that he missed that got him into deep water. He said,

“I was not present at the finance committee meeting the night they voted on next year’s budget.

Next morning, I got a call from the chair. ‘Preacher’ she said, ‘great meeting last night. I opened with prayer and it was as if the Holy Spirit descended on us. With little discussion we unanimously approved next year’s budget -- a 10 percent increase over this year’s.

It was wonderful! There’s a new spirit in this congregation and we’re going to ride with it.’

I said, in love, ‘Let me get this straight. The church that is five percent behind on this year’s budget is going to have a ten percent increase next year? That’s crazy!

I’m the spiritual leader of this congregation. I will tell you when the Holy Spirit gets here. There is no way that you will pledge that budget!’

‘Well, you weren’t there and we’ve already voted, so that’s that,’ she replied.

On Sundays during October, the chair reported on our progress during worship. On the second Sunday in October she rose at the beginning of the service and said,

‘I never thought I’d live to see this day in this church. I am pleased to announce that we have pledged next year’s budget ... in full!’

The church erupted in spontaneous applause.

‘This is all the more amazing considering that this is a huge increase over this year’s budget.’

The church erupted in applause again.

The pastor would later say to the chair of the finance committee, ‘Now, as I remember, there was somebody who said. ‘You will never pledge that budget.’ Help me remember. Who said, ‘That’s crazy you will never pledge that budget’? Who said that?’

You said it preacher. Sometimes we preachers are the last to go out into deep water. We preach about faith but many of us have become a cautious, careful lot. We know that sometimes the fish aren’t running at night ... that you have to carefully clean and mend you nets every day and not take too many risks.

We know what it is to experience lean times.

And so in our experience we sometimes forget why we got into this business in the first place. It was because someone named Jesus got into the boat with us dumped us on the deep end and taught us to swim.

We even found the courage at one time to leave our boats and our nets and come follow him.

THE FISHERMAN BACKSLIDE

But, somewhere along the way things changed. It happened to these first disciples you know. They went fishing with Jesus. They trusted him in the deep waters. They left everything to follow him and go fishing for men and

women. They heard him speak about going into the whole world and preaching the gospel.

And do you know where the risen Christ found the disciples? In the gospel of John we read the story. (John 20:1-19) It reads a lot like this story.

The disciples, instead of preaching the gospel have gone back to fishing. They have gone backwards in their spiritual life.

One commentator referred to this as the age old dance step, "The Fisherman Backslide." Yogi Berra might have said that it's déjà vu all over again.

All night long they have fished and again they have caught nothing. Jesus, watching from shore in the early morning, tells them to cast their net on the other side. They do it, and once again they are overwhelmed with the bounty of God.

Peter realizes that he's seen this miracle before. It's Jesus. Peter jumps into deep water, swims to shore, and then once again Peter is overwhelmed by guilt. And once again Jesus has to assure him of forgiveness.

When you read that story, you want to ask, "Did the disciples ever learn their lesson? How many fishing expeditions did Jesus have to take them on before they learned to trust him?"

But, then we can ask the same question about us. Will we ever learn to trust Jesus in the deep water? Will we ever learn to reach out to others in the name of Jesus instead of always just worrying about how we're going to get our next meal? Will we ever quit doing the fishermen backslide?

Apparently, we have (as Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young might put it) taught our children well. Duke University's school of business did a survey of its students as to what they wanted most from the school. A published summary of that survey was entitled, "Money, power and things."

That's what they wanted out of school more than anything else. Duke is a very expensive school to attend if all you want is money, power and things. There are a lot cheaper ways to prepare for that life.

But, the question is this, is that a life worth living?

Somehow I don't think all the money, power and things in the world will make us happy. We need something more, something like ... I don't know ... peace, love and justice maybe.

We need to become fishers of men and women ... seeking to fill the needs of those less fortunate ... lest we drown ourselves because we fill our own boats too full of the world's bounty.

LIFE WITH MEANING

Victor Frankl, a Viennese psychiatrist has written extensively about what it took to survive in the Nazi death camps. He said that those who lost hope soon died.

But, those who could find a reason to live were able to hang on despite the most terrible of circumstances.

It is not the circumstances that make our life good or bad. It is what we do with those circumstances that make the difference.

Maybe God wants us to go fishing in his name ... or maybe God wants us to drop our nets and do something entirely new. The important point is not what we do but that we do it in the name of Christ.

Some people need to drop everything and follow Jesus, but not all can do that.

Some of you have responsibilities. You have people who are counting on you. You have work to do. You can't leave your job to follow a dream.

I have good news. This word is for you too. Maybe your work is your calling.

It may be mundane. It may be draining. But, it is important, and you are important.

When you go fishing, when the night is long and the rewards seem slim, remember that Jesus goes with you. And sometimes the best place to fish is in that deep water ... that place where your struggle meets the gracious provision of God.

Let down your nets and trust in the grace of God.
He'll give you a job to do and a hope that is eternal.

Amen.