

“Deep Water”

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Luke 5:1-11

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.

A FISH STORY

I had a friend in North Carolina who proudly displayed a trophy on the wall in his den.

It was a fish...a very big sailfish.

And of course, along with that fish on the wall there was a fish story.

He said that catching a fish like that was a rare occurrence.

The ship's captain stood by as my friend reeled it in.
He wanted to make sure that they didn't lose this rare prize.

Once the fish was aboard the captain headed for shore immediately.

He couldn't wait to show everyone that one of his clients had caught such a magnificent fish.
It would be good for business.

But, my friend, an experienced fisherman, was not impressed.

He said that the sailfish didn't put up much of a fight,
and that he would rather catch a five pound bass any day.

Fish stories.

Devoted fisherman never tire of telling you about their big catch, or the even bigger one that got away.

Often these fish stories are not really about the big catch. They are really about the people who tell the story.

If you listen closely to a fish story,
you will learn that it's about more than just fish.

Such is the case with our lesson for today.

NO LUCK ALL NIGHT

The fishermen in today's lesson had been fishing all night, and they had come up empty.

Now, if we go fishing and don't catch anything, no problem.

We just go down to Publix and buy what we want.

But, these were professional fishermen.
If the fish didn't run, if their nets were empty,

they didn't make any money.

And even if you didn't catch any fish,
you still had to take care of your equipment.
The nets had to be cleaned and mended.

That's what they were doing early in the morning by the shore.

JESUS CLIMBS IN THE BOAT

But, they weren't the only ones by the shore that day. A man named Jesus was preaching to large crowds. In fact, the crowds were so large that made it hard for this preacher to be heard.

Now there was a boat anchored
in the shallow water just off shore.
It belonged to man named Simon.

He was one of the fishermen
who had no luck the night before,
and was dutifully cleaning his fishing nets.

Jesus climbed into that boat
and asked Simon if he would
put out from shore just a bit so that he could preach and the whole crowd
could hear.

Simon obliges this rabbi's request.

At this point I have to wonder why.
Simon was, no doubt, dog tired from all that fruitless fishing he had done
the night before.

Why in the world would he stop what he was doing to help out this itinerant
preacher?

Maybe Simon was curious about Jesus.
Maybe he had heard about all that Jesus had done.
Already Jesus' exploits had garnered praise from almost everyone.

Or maybe Simon just gave in to the request because the place had gotten too crowded to get any work done.

Whatever the reason,
Simon obliged and had a front row seat
as Jesus sat down and taught the crowd.

A BOATLOAD OF FISH

After he had finished teaching, this carpenter turned preacher, gives the professional fisherman some advice on how to catch fish.

He tells him, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."

Simon is surprised by this request.
He tells Jesus,

"Look, we've been fishing all night
and haven't caught a thing."

But, for some reason Simon gives in to Jesus' request.

Even though he was bone tired from fishing all night and cleaning nets, this professional fisherman takes the word of carpenter about where to find fish!

Simon says, "If you say so, I'll let down the nets."

So Simon casts off for deep waters, lets down the nets, and the fish practically jump into the boat.
In fact there are so many fish
that the boat starts to sink.

I've never ever heard a fish story to top this one.
This is truly a fish story of biblical proportions.

On one level we I guess we do learn a bit about fishing.

If you want a big catch of fish you sometimes have to head for deep waters.

These days there are even TV shows about commercial fishermen who go out into deep and dangerous waters in order to bring in the big catch.

ABUNDANCE IN DEEP WATER

Those shows teach us that you've got to go where the fish are. Deep water. Dangerous water.

But, as we learn a bit later in the story, this is not just a fish story.

This is a story that teaches us a spiritual principle. It's a story about the abundant life.

Jesus once said, "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly." (John 10:10b)

And how do we find this abundant life?
How do we fill our lives to the brim with blessings?

Whether we're talking about fish, wisdom, love, peace, joy, this principle holds true:

If you want life in abundance,
you have to cast off into deep water.

Some people fail to have an abundant life
because they are unwilling to cast off into deep water.

I can understand why.

Deep water is risky.
Deep water is uncertain.

It's hard to see in the dark black water in the deep.
Who knows what lies beneath?
Deep water requires faith and focus.

On the other hand, shallow water is warm and safe.
Nothing dangerous to cause you harm.

Just the minnows that tickle your ankles as you walk.

Visibility isn't a problem in shallow water.
You can see all the way to the bottom.

And that's why staying in shallow waters is such a temptation.

But, the professional fisherman knows that the minnows by the shore are not enough to feed the people. The big catch always comes in the deep, dangerous waters off shore.

And abundant life also comes in that same place.

All of us need to listen to Jesus
as he teaches by the shore.
But, then there comes a time to trust Jesus and push off into deeper waters.

Simon was not so sure about fishing in the middle of the day when the fish weren't running.

But, he was willing to try.
He said, "Okay, we fished all night
and caught nothing Jesus.
Yet, if you say so, I'll put down the nets."

SIXTEEN TONS

What prevents us from casting out into deep waters and letting down our nets?

What prevents us from listening to Jesus instead of the voices of discouragement?

It's the same thing that made Simon and the other disciples slow to believe.

They fished all night and caught nothing.
And sometimes the same thing happens to us.

Now, I'm not just talking about you fishermen out there who occasionally have a bad day on the water.

I'm talking about all of us.

Some days, despite working very hard, everything seems to go wrong. We get absolutely no return for our work except a chance to work even harder.

My favorite musical expression of this was a song that Tennessee Ernie Ford made famous.

Talking about the coal miners who used to work for "script" that could only be used at the coal mine's company store, he would sing,

"Sixteen tons and what do I get
another day older and deeper in debt.
St. Peter don't you call me cause I can't go.
I owe my soul to the company store."

We might not be coal miners, but some days we know that kind of discouragement.

We work as hard as we can and what do we get?
Another day older and deeper in debt.

It feels like we owe our soul
to our employers and our creditors.
We are at the mercy of the vicissitudes of life.
We're one paycheck away from disaster.

It's hard to go back and let down our nets when things go so wrong.
It's hard to go back to work when you're not sure the company is going to make it another day.

Simon, rather reluctantly said to Jesus,
"If you say so..."

I hear a lot of discouragement in that response.

It sounds like a child who is reluctant to follow the advice of his or her parents.
And so they say,

“Okay, if you say so...”

(With the unspoken attitude that says: “But, I think this is a really foolish idea!”)

A LIFE CHANGING MIRACLE

Turns out though that Jesus’ advice was not foolish.
It led to an incredible catch.
In fact you could call it overwhelming.

How many fish did they catch?

They caught so much fish
that their nets began to break.

They caught so much fish
that their boat began to sink.

They caught so much fish that they had to signal for another boat to come
and help them.

Now this is where this fish story takes another interesting turn.

What was Simon’s reaction to this overwhelming catch?

Did he say, “Jesus, you’re in the wrong business.
You need to leave this preaching gig and come fish with us”?

No, Simon fell on his knees and said,
“Go away from me, Lord,
for I am a sinful man!”

Now, that’s a surprising response.
I ask you,
“Where’s the sin in this story?” I don’t see it.

Compared to some of the other stories about Simon Peter’s life I think he
comes off pretty good in this one.

When Jesus commandeered Simon's boat
so that he could preach to the crowds,
Simon didn't object.

And when Jesus asked Simon
to push off into deep water
and let down his nets,
Simon obeyed.

Why does Simon feel so sinful?
Why does he ask Jesus to leave?

WOE IS ME!

Our Old Testament lectionary lesson sheds some light on this.

We didn't read that story, but it's one that's familiar to many of you.

It's about the time when God calls Isaiah to be His prophet.

When Isaiah caught a glimpse of the hem of God's robe in the Temple, he
was absolutely overwhelmed with a sense of guilt and fear.

Isaiah said,

"Woe is me! ...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!"

Simon's reaction is very similar.

And Simon's reaction to the big catch lets us know that this is more than
just a fish story.

This is a story about the Son of God.

Simon and the other disciples sensed this.

They realized that they were in the presence of the Holy One.

And that scared them out of their wits.

People being filled with holy fear is like a bell that sounds throughout Luke's gospel.

When Jesus was born and the angels filled the sky,
how did the shepherds respond to that glory? Fear.

In a few weeks on the Sunday before Lent we will once again talk about the Mount of Transfiguration.

How did the disciples respond when they saw glory in the face of Jesus on that mountaintop?
Fear.

Well, the same is true in our lesson for today.
Simon and the others were afraid.
This miracle catch filled them with dread and a sense of unworthiness.

INSTEAD OF FEAR, FOLLOW

But, Jesus uses this opportunity to say something
that also rings like a bell throughout Luke's gospel.

"Don't be afraid..."

And he takes away the fear
by giving these fishermen a new job.
He told them, "...from now on you will be catching people" instead of fish.

And how did the disciples respond to this call?
When they made it to shore,
they dropped everything and followed Jesus.

This was no longer a story
about the abundance of fish.
This was now a story about the abundant life.

And the disciples were determined to follow the one who could make that
life possible.

Do we believe in the miracle?

Do we believe that when we cast off with Jesus into deep water, that there is abundance on the horizon?

EXPECTATION AND FAITH

In the book of Hebrews we read that faith is:

“the substance of things hoped for,
the conviction of things not seen.” Hebrews 11:1

As one preacher put it,
“Expectation is the first-born child of faith...”
No expectation. No faith.

If we don't have great expectations,
we will never dare to travel the deep waters with Jesus.

So, the question is this,
What do we believe about God
as revealed in Jesus?

Is God truly the 'giver of every good gift'?

Can we trust the goodness of God?
Do we believe that God in Christ will increase the family of faith?

Do we believe that God will widen our nets
so that we can welcome more people into our hearts and into the Kingdom
of God?

Today, God in Christ asks us
to prepare for a big catch.

Abundance comes in many forms.
This miracle is about more than just a boatload of fish.

The miracle is about the excitement and expectation that comes when we
drop our fears, our guilt, our frustration and decide to follow Jesus.

A commentator on this passage wrote,

God put the “sword in the swordfish,
and the sail in the sailfish.

He put the big in the whale
and the play in the dolphin;
it was him alone who put the electric in the eel.

And if He’s God enough to do all of that,
what can He do with you,
when you’re ready to catch fish?”

Let’s leave the past behind
and cast off into deep water.
And let’s prepare for a big catch.

Amen.