

Piscatorial Promise
Luke 5: 1-11
Don Lincoln

Some of you know fishing is something I happen to enjoy. In case you don't, here's the background screen from my computer.



I love this shot from outside of Aspen, Colorado – not because of the great scenery or because I happen to be about 25 years younger; but because it's one of the few pictures with me actually having a fish on the line!!!

So you shouldn't be surprised that I was thrilled when a lectionary text showed up this week about fishing!

But our Gospel lesson is not about recreational fishing. It's about men who do this for a living, not a therapeutic hobby. Guys who spend late night and early morning hours on the water, not evening hours by the fire reading Orvis catalogs about fly rods. Fishermen who are out all night; every night.

The text tells us they are cleaning their nets. This little detail lets us know their fishing has ended. They fish at night to avoid the heat of the day and also because their linen nets are less visible to the fish in the dark. When done, they spend their day taking care of the nets. Debris and silt get caught in the flax fibers, along with sticks, dead fish and trash. Nets need to be cleaned, washed, mended and hung up to dry after every fishing trip.¹

Imagine having all THAT work to do, along with the consternation of having fished all night and catching nothing.

And so, it's to these seasoned – and disappointed – professionals that Jesus (a carpenter and a preacher using a boat as a pulpit) suggests “Go back out into the deep water and drop your clean nets over the side.” Simon Peter, the owner/operator, tells Jesus, “Look, we've fished all night with no success.” I also wonder if Simon was tempted to say “Look, we're the professionals here! What the heck does a preacher or a carpenter know about fishing?”

But they do as Jesus instructs, row out, lower the nets, and lo and behold, a back-stressing, net-breaking, boat-sinking, extravagant yield of fish. So many fish they have to call the guys with the other boat on the shore and come out and help haul it in.

Notice what happens next. Simon Peter does not respond to the magnitude of this catch like a fisherman. Not, “How did you **KNOW** where the fish were?” Or better yet, “Hey Jesus, can you come back tomorrow night?”

Clearly for Simon, as soon as the full nets are in – and the abundance realized – the catch becomes insignificant. It pales in comparison to the reality of the abundance-producing power that confronts him.

Simon shifts from the security of a **fixed, failed reality** – “We fished all night and have nothing to show for it” — to the **overflowing, uncontained reality** before him. Just as the water is deep and dark, so Simon senses the gap between his world and the world of Jesus’ new creation is a big gap. Things have become unpredictable all of a sudden and even pretty scary. Simon sees his situation as a lack of faith, rather than a lack of fish.

Simon falls to his knees and blurts out, “Go away from me Lord for I am a sinful man.” Literally in the Greek it’s more like “Get out of my neighborhood.” Isn’t it funny how last Sunday they wanted Jesus out of Nazareth because of His preaching. Now they want Him out of Galilee because of his fishing!²

Simon’s response is the classic response to such a revelatory experience. The same way we see it throughout scripture. A sense of how small and inadequate the human spirit is before the magnitude of the Lord. If we had read the two other lectionary texts for today we would have seen the same.

One is Isaiah 6, from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. Here’s what he writes, “...I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, and the hem of his robe filled the temple – and seraphs with six wings singing Holy, Holy, Holy, and the foundations were shaking and the place filled with smoke....” Those of you who know that story know what Isaiah said at this experience: “**WOE IS ME! I am lost, I am a man of unclean lips!**”

Another lectionary text for today – First Corinthians 15 the New Testament apostle Paul speaks of all the Lord’s appearances, and appearing finally to him – “as to one untimely born, the least of the apostles, **unfit to be called an apostle.**”

But to this sense of unworthiness when confronted by God in each of these stories comes a reassuring word. To Isaiah “a seraph touches his mouth with a coal from the altar and says, “Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.” Paul, in his realization, declares, but I am who I am – an apostle – “only by the grace of God.” “Be not afraid” Jesus says to Simon. Don’t worry. It’s all good. I got this.

Throughout Scripture, all stories are like that. A divine revelation – a human sense of unworthiness – a reassurance from God that God has all things under control. But none of those stories stop there. What comes next?

A commissioning and an opportunity to respond. “Whom shall I send?” God says to Isaiah. “Here am I, send me.” Saul, the persecutor, becomes Paul the Apostle. Jesus to Simon Peter, “From now on you will fish for people.” And what does it say they do? “When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed Jesus.”

Discipleship and call stories always raise for us an opportunity to ponder our own discipleship. We may resonate with Simon (or Isaiah, or Paul) in questioning our ability to follow Christ and to serve. We may think our previous work and life experience may not fully prepare us for the challenges that discipleship can hold down the road ahead.³ Yeah, right! Nobody in seminary ever told me I’d be preaching to cameras and doing virtual communion. Who would’ve thought? But Jesus promises to work with us, to equip and enable us to do the fishing He calls us to do!

Last week there was an op-ed in the NY Times about live streaming. Tish Warren, an Anglican Priest, in her article titled “*Why Churches Should Drop Their Online Services*” writes: In March of 2020, my church was one of the first in our city to forgo meeting in person and switch to an online format, and I encouraged other churches to do the same. Now I think it’s time to drop the virtual option.

People need physical touch and interaction. We need to connect with other human beings through our bodies, through the ordinary vulnerability of looking into their eyes, hearing their voice, sharing their space, their smells, their presence. Christians need to hear the babies crying in church. They need to taste the bread and wine.⁴ I couldn’t agree more.

But I had one problem with the primary assumption in that article, and that was that all churches went online because of the pandemic. And while that was the case for many, it was not so for Westminster.

Three years before COVID, this congregation perceived an opportunity – perhaps, if you will, a new way of fishing. Not to supplant the old way, but to add to it. To connect with people who couldn’t get out; who lived a distance; who were home recovering from some ailment; who were on the road traveling. And I know some of you are with us online this morning for some of those reasons.

I agree. Online church ain’t like being in the room. But I’m confident it’s one of our many tools of discipleship. One more way to cast our nets. And people are gathered today in this space; and some are in their apartment somewhere – some with a neighbor; some with family members – and will touch the bread and taste the wine. And worship.

God continues to do new things to go fishing.

The disciples’ experience that day shows us that to Jesus, ability is not nearly as important as availability.³ And He promises to equip us with whatever we need in each and every new season, to cast our nets.

But the best application of this text I read all week was this short quote from our friend Steve Garnaas-Holmes:

*To be fishers of people
is to let the great net of your love
down into their lives,
trusting that there you will discover
miracles and blessings,
and draw them out.⁵*

That's really the heart of it. For each of us, to let the great net of our love – a reflection of God's love – through whatever way or means necessary – to let the great net of our love be cast into the world, into the lives of others.

The best fishing ever.....may it be so.....AMEN.

1. Amy Zietlow, Living by the Word, *Christian Century*, 1/26/22
2. William Willimon, Living by the Word; *Christian Century*, 1/27/04
3. Zietlow, op. cit.
4. Tish Warren, New York Times, 1/30/22.
4. Steve Garnaas-Holmes, *Unfolding Light*, 2/4/22