



## **“Let Down Your Nets”**

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*Luke 5:1-11*

It was about 10:30 p.m. on Wednesday evening of this week. My daughters were in bed, supposedly asleep, and I had just turned off all the lights in the house, set the alarm, and got into bed to read before going to sleep. Amanda and I were deeply engrossed in our books when we heard high-pitched screaming and little pattering feet heading straight to our bedroom. “Roach! Roach! There’s a roach on Beatrice’s pillow! Roach!” Of course, I jumped up and went to rescue my girls. I made my way to their bedroom and as I was listening to their half giggles and half screams, I looked back to see Amanda still warmly snuggled in bed reading. I said, “Aren’t you going to help me get this roach?” And to that, she glared at me and said, “You know I don’t do roaches.”

So, I armed myself with a flip-flop with which to crush the enemy, flipped on the overhead light to their bedroom, and approached Beatrice’s pillow with the same caution I would have approaching, well, a pillow with a roach on it. I pulled down the covers of the bed. No roach. Uh oh. I slowly turned over the pillow and there it was, the big palmetto bug. I squashed and disposed of the roach and tucked the girls back into bed. To which Beatrice said, “Daddy, I’m still scared that a roach is going to get me.” And I said, “I know dear. But I’ll be right here, ready to rescue you if you need me. Just say the word!”

Our Gospel Lesson reminds us of the life-changing power of a word. You see, Jesus spoke a word to Simon, James, and John, calling them to be the first disciples. He called them from their fear, fear of the power of God, fear of their own sin and struggle, and fear of what life might look like if they did indeed follow. Jesus spoke a word to them. Yet, prior to Jesus’ call to the trio of disciples, Jesus’ word had brought the crowds of people to the lakeshore to hear his teaching. It was a divine word that made Jesus so popular. Before our Gospel Lesson today, Jesus healed a possessed man in Capernaum which caused all the people to be amazed and say to each other, “What words these are! With authority and power he gives orders to impure spirits and they come out!” And so, the crowd pressed in on him to hear and to learn more, pushing Jesus to find sanctuary in Simon’s boat. And even from the boat Jesus continued to teach and speak the word of God to the clamoring people.

Before coming to the lakeshore, Jesus had gone from town to town, synagogue to synagogue giving hope and proclaiming the “good news of the kingdom of God.” He showed his healing powers by curing Simon’s mother-in-law by giving a word of rebuke to the illness, causing the illness to leave her. And he healed many more from their diseases and cast out many demons from others, all with a word. And even when Jesus was tired and wanted to get away the crowds looked for him and wanted to hear more of his words. Jesus finally gave the word that he must go to other towns, for all people must know that God loves them and that God wants to bring them into a place of powerful hope.

And with this word from God fresh on Jesus' lips, we get to our Gospel Lesson for today. The fifth chapter of Luke introduces us to Luke's account of the call of the first disciple, Simon. We've all heard the many Gospel stories of Jesus calling the first disciples. But in Matthew, Mark, and John, this was one of the first things that happened. In Mark and John, this took place in the very first chapter. In Luke, however, Jesus had already performed many miracles before calling Simon in the fifth chapter.

And we see in this fifth chapter text for today, that Jesus encountered fishermen who had been fishing all night. For you see, it was much easier to catch fish at night when the waters were cooler and the fish couldn't see the activity of the boats above them. That's why Simon whines to Jesus, "C'mon Jesus, we don't want to go out into deep water where the fish will be impossible to catch! We're tired! We just cleaned our nets and we want to go home!" But there was something about the words of this man, Jesus, that affected this rough and tough fisherman. It seemed like an impossible task, and a task that Simon had no energy for after an extremely long work day. Simon and the rest of the fishermen were pushed right up to their limits, right to the place where they should've given up. But Jesus gave them a word. He gave them a word of hope. There was hope that Jesus would bring life where there was death, plenty where there was meagerness, and hope where there was fear. And he did. All that the fishermen were required to do was to let down their nets.

But I feel a lot like Simon, putting off the word from Jesus and making excuses. I mean, we all tend to put things off, right? Or maybe we've just been working hard, tending to our lives and we simply want to be left alone? We busy ourselves with washing and mending our nets or patching our boats and we miss the teachable moments of Jesus. But Jesus has a word for us like he did for the fishermen. Are we ready to let down our nets at a moment's notice when the Spirit of God calls us to act? Are we ready to drop everything to help someone in need? We might need to drop everything when a friend has cancer. We might need to drop everything when someone's electricity bill is late. We might need to drop everything when someone needs a listening ear. We might need to let down our nets because Jesus has a miracle waiting for us, a miracle that we can be a part of if we simply obey.

I know all of this is true, but I still feel like Simon! It says that Simon fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" I am a sinner. How can I possibly follow you and obey your word and fish for people when I am tired and weak and worn! The Gospel Lesson today is one of fear. The Old Testament text for today is also one of fear, fear that God won't love or accept the young Isaiah because of his sinfulness. In the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah had a vision of God on a throne in a temple filled with smoke and angels. And the only thing Isaiah could think to say was, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man with unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the Lord." Isaiah thought he couldn't be used by God and Simon felt he couldn't be used by God. Often, I feel like I can't be used by God.

But that is not Jesus' word to us today. Jesus' word to us is one of acceptance, but also one of risk. In order to let down our nets and live into the word of life given by Jesus, we must take risks. Jesus asked Simon to do one little thing. Jesus took a risk in asking Peter to push off into

the deep and to let down his net. Peter might not have responded. And Peter also took a risk by taking his clean net and his tired body and going on a mission with Jesus. It is a risk to follow Jesus into the unknown. But Simon's positive response to the word of God led to him being part of a movement of Jesus to bring all people, the world, into the boat. The haul of fish was so big that the nets began to break and the boat began to sink. Simon had to beckon for another boat to come help them, so that both boats were filled to the brim. A lonely, fruitless, frustrating night had turned into a plentiful and lively morning.

For us to gather as a church, to follow Christ, is to risk, to risk falling into the grasp of the living God. We, as a church, have to risk everything, even if we are afraid. Duke Professor, Will Willimon, in his lectionary preaching book talks about the risky love of God. He says, "Here's a love that can blow you to bits, turn you inside out. No wonder we tiptoe around this presence and turn our churches into carpeted bedrooms, fearful that we might awaken this one. Note how we chatter, nervously, before the music begins, the way people chatter when they're scared of what might come next. We transform our worship into the backslapping conviviality of a Kiwanis Club meeting; everybody smiling, reassuring one another that this is only church, only Sunday, only God, nothing over which to be alarmed."

But we know better! Just like Isaiah said, "Holy, holy, holy," we too fall down in the boat with Jesus and say, "Leave me! I'm a sinner! How can you possibly love me? I'm just going through the motions one hour a week on Sundays! Leave me alone!" But Jesus never leaves us. God never leaves us! God touched Isaiah's lips and made him a prophet. He was lost but then he was found. Jesus called Simon to be a disciple, promising to teach him how to be a fisher of people, and forgave him time and time again, even when Peter denied him three times at the cross. Jesus' word of life doesn't let us go. The living God calls out to us to move through our fears and go out into the world and bring to people that word of life.

And that's what we get when we obey the word of God. We encounter the aliveness of God's word. The fishermen, these new disciples, found that their ordinary work, their tired traditions, had become extraordinary and alive again. Their faithful following of Jesus made their ordinary work of fishing the very vehicle of Jesus' real presence in the life of the world. And this idea of "aliveness" is highlighted in this text today. This notion that Jesus proclaimed that Simon would "catch people" masks a fabulous Greek translation. Simon wasn't only going to be someone who caught people, but the translation really says that Simon would be "taking" or "saving women and men alive." To save men and women alive is a very different and profound image than simply catching people as though they were to be floppy, lifeless fish to be consumed and collected. As one of the commentators I read said, the verb "catch" is "used in the Septuagint to denote rescue from peril of death, not the capture of animals—and so [it is] as inappropriate to fishing as it is appropriate to the Christian mission which it initiates."<sup>1</sup> The bold new world of God shouldn't be one of dead fish, but of human beings fully alive—not creatures wriggling and writhing in the last gasps before death, but people living the life of the good word, the good news in all its fullness.

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<sup>1</sup> John Drury. *Traditions and Design in Luke's Gospel* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976), 67.

And that new life is what we get when we take a risk and set out into deep waters with Jesus even when we are scared or alone or tired. Like Simon's call to fish for persons, what we might experience when we risk encountering people where they are is unpredictable. We don't know what we'll get when we let down our nets and reach out to the man on the side of the road, cold and dirty, smelling of hard days and hard liquor. We don't know what we'll get when we let down our nets and reach out to the tired parent who barely has time to take a shower in between chores and children and work and paying bills. We don't know what we'll get when we let down our nets and reach out to people of other faiths and customs who also hope to share good words in our community. We don't know what we'll get when we let down our nets and reach out to those we don't know or those we fear, those of other cultures and other traditions. It's a risk to let down our nets and move beyond the stereotypes we have always embraced. Jesus's word is an invitation to venture out of our comfort zones, into new depths, because if we do we will find that we help other people and also ourselves become fully alive.

But setting out into the depths while tired and hurting can be fear inducing. But it is in the depths where God has a word of life. Rev. Robert Wright from the Episcopal Diocese in Atlanta, Georgia says, "Deep water is where the increase is. Deep water takes faith. Deep water is a risk. Focus of mind and heart are needed. The visibility in deep black water is next to nothing. You've got to trust the words and directions of others who have passed through deep water to make it there. Jesus is always inviting people to the deeper end of things. But shallow water is pleasant. It tickles our ankles when we walk in it. The minnows and the half-grown fish gather there. You can see all the way to the bottom in shallow water. Staying in shallow water is such a temptation. Shallow water doesn't cost much; it doesn't take a whole lot of courage. But Simon knew the minnows couldn't feed him. They couldn't fill him. The minnows weren't the desire of his heart. The deep water of faith is where those things we say we want are swimming around. The shallow is where we begin the adventure, not where we finish. [But] deep water is where we have to go to get what God has for us."

Jesus has a word for us, just like the first disciples. That word is "Don't be afraid!" God's living word demands of us a decision to either stay in the boat with all the fish we just caught and reap the rewards, or to leave everything behind and follow Jesus, the one who moves us out into the depths to become fully alive. So, even though life is hard and life is scary, God remains faithful and loving, even in the midst of fear, even in the midst of our struggles, our sorrows, and our shame. Jesus gave a word to the crowds around the Lake of Gennesaret, to Simon, James, and John, to the many generations after, and to us today. It is in our greatest needs and greatest fears that a word from Jesus comes.

Jesus tells us to let down our nets, to move through our tiredness and our apathy and to find ways to make people alive, alive with the good news of God. So, don't be afraid of how the word of Jesus pushes and pulls and prods us outward into the deep, new, and boundless horizon. Let down your nets and become fully alive.

Amen.