

Fishing With Jesus  
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. William D. Peterson  
Coeur d'Alene, First Presbyterian Church  
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Luke 5:1 - 11

(NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, <sup>2</sup> he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." <sup>5</sup> Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." <sup>6</sup> When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" <sup>9</sup> For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; <sup>10</sup> and so also were James and John, sons of Zeb'edee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." <sup>11</sup> When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

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The Sermon

I have to confess at the outset that this text from Luke almost shouts out to become a "GOOD NEWS/BAD NEWS" sermon.

Ironically, what makes it "good news", and what makes it "bad news", are the exact same thing.

THE GOOD NEWS

The "good news" is that Jesus wants to take you fishing.

The "bad news" is that Jesus wants to take you fishing.

This story of the great catch of fish, featuring Jesus and Simon Peter, is one of the few stories about Jesus that appear in both the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and also in the Gospel of John. New Testament scholars tend to assume it was originally one story, but whereas in John's Gospel it is a post-resurrection story, each of the Synoptic Gospel writers place it at some point in the ministry of Jesus prior to his death and resurrection.

In Luke's Gospel Jesus' pronouncement that Simon will leave his family fishing business and undertake a radically different life as a "fisher of people," is the

counterpart to the call of Paul in Acts – a book also written by Luke, although in Acts the commission is actually communicated through Ananias (Acts 9:15).

In both stories there is the demonstration of supernatural power that becomes life-changing.

It is interesting that both stories give Simon Peter the opportunity to be changed forever. In Luke it is a radical transformation of life, career, family relationships, and so forth.

In Acts, it is a chance for redemption. Peter is given the opportunity to atone for his betrayal of Jesus. Talk about sweet, sweet, redemption.

But let's not permit ourselves to be all caught up in the story of Peter and his relationship to Jesus. Let's bring this story into contemporary times and into our personal lives.

As a start, consider this "poser" of a statement:

**If you believe that your past determines your future fate, consider today's lesson from Luke's Gospel. Nothing could have been more surprising to Peter than to realize that he -- a fisherman by trade -- would become a disciple of a wandering rabbi and, ultimately, the head of the Jerusalem church following Jesus' death and resurrection.**

Or consider the story of Maya Angelou, an elderly contemporary of ours. Who could have believed she would become an award winning poet whose words would grace a presidential inauguration, given what she survived earlier in life.

Ms. Angelou provides remarkable testimony to the fact that the most unpromising of pasts do not prevent the most incredible of futures.

Maya is an African-American woman, now in her 70s, who was born in Arkansas. She grew up in the worst years of racism in the South, in abject poverty, in constant danger of lynching and persecution and all the rest of it.

She was raped as a child, and when she told somebody about it, the man who had raped her -- by coincidence -- died within a few days. She felt that somehow her having told this terrible thing had killed him. So for eight years she didn't speak a word. She was, literally, mute, silent. However, she went on to be a dancer, a writer, an actress. She was in that wonderful TV series "Roots," playing the grandmother of Kunta Kinte. In other words she was an amazing woman, full of life and beauty and strength and spirit.

A few years back Ms Angelou was paired with the Presbyterian minister and author Frederick Buechner. Both were guest speakers at a major religious event because both had dedicated their professional lives to telling their stories.

Buechner went first.

When the priest got up to introduce her he said some of these things that I've told you about her and then said, "You will now hear from Maya Angelou a very different story from

the story you have just heard from Frederick Buechner." And as he said that, Buechner reports, Ms. Angelou was shaking her head quite vigorously from side to side. And when she got up to the microphone, she said, "He was wrong." She said, "I have *exactly* the same story to tell as Frederick Buechner."

Buechner reports how deeply moved he was by those actions and words by Maya Angelou, because in so many ways he and she could not have had stories that were more different:

- Buechner was a man, Angelou a woman.
- He was white, she black.
- She grew up in dire poverty, he grew up, by comparison, in the lap of luxury.
- She had to scrap and scrape to make it and he went to private prep schools and then on to Princeton. Both before and after seminary he taught at elite prep schools.

So, how could she say that she had *exactly the same story* to tell?

Buechner explains it this way. "There are thousands of differences between us, and yet I felt that she had told the truth, and we indeed have the same story." And that story, Buechner believes, is the story of all of us--meaning he would include everyone sitting here today.

**We all have the same story in the sense of having survived hard times, especially the hard times of childhood.**

**Our hard times may not have been or may not be as dramatic as the rape and the discrimination Ms. Angelou had to endure, or the pain and confusion Mr. Buechner felt when his father committed suicide when Frederick was only ten, but into all lives pain and hardship comes.**

**And we all have the same story in the sense of trying to become human in a world which tempts us all the time to be something less than human.**

**And we all have the same story in the sense that we all struggle to believe in God in a world which gives us a thousand reasons every week for not believing in a darn thing.**

And that is the biblical story--the story of people through the centuries struggling with the overwhelming hardships and tragedies which come to individuals and families and nations, while also trying to celebrate the overwhelming sweetness and joy that come at times into individual and collective lives. It is the story of a human race beginning in innocence and perfect communion with God, and losing that innocence and communion (and don't we all feel we can identify with that cycle?), and of God constantly seeking ways to let the people know that he is as interested in restoring that union and communion as they--maybe even more so.

As Christians we believe that the story of God's reaching out to humanity reached its culmination in the earthly and human sense with the birth, the life, and the death of Jesus of Nazareth.

We also believe, however, that the story is far from over as we continue to encounter Jesus the Christ--the resurrected Lord--in the most astounding of ways and places.

From our text we learn that the words of Jesus had become so captivating to the people of the Galilee that crowd control was now an issue. People packed tightly around Jesus, and strained to hear whatever he said. But the crowds were pressing in so tight that Jesus could barely breathe.

So he used Simon's boat to gain some space, and some perspective. He sat down in the boat and taught. Then he finished teaching the crowd, but he wasn't finished teaching. In characteristic fashion, Jesus' focus changed from the multitude to the individual. Jesus' teaching method changed from the verbal to the visual. To this point Simon was merely a fisherman who had a boat Jesus needed as a pulpit. Now Simon would become a fisher of men, whose passion, energy, and commitment Jesus needed as a disciple.

So Jesus said to Simon, "Row on out a ways--out into the deep waters."

Now at this point Simon and the others must have been a bit put out by this preacher. He'd commandeered one of their boats, he'd taken them away from the chores they needed to complete before they could get some much needed sleep, and now he wanted to be taken on a little boat ride as well. And if that wasn't enough, once they had taken him out to the deep waters where he wanted to go, he told them to drop their nets and fish some more.

We sense a radical change in the level of tension in the story at this point. Simon Peter had been content to let Jesus distract him from his cleanup work on the nets. He had been content to let Jesus preach and teach out of his boat--after all, that's what rabbis do is preach and teach. But now Jesus wants to get involved in Simon's work as well, telling him how to fish.

We know the result--a fish story to top all fish stories. Fished all night and got nothing and now the nets were about to break and the boats were about to sink with the catch. In later years Peter could probably look back on his particular fish story and laugh, but laughter was the furthest thing from his mind at the time. Instead, his response was one of shame and remorse. He knelt right there in the boat and begged Jesus to depart from him.

Now, why this? Why would a bunch of fish inspire Peter to reflect upon his own unworthiness?

If you don't know why Peter said, "Get away from me Jesus," then you don't know about the dangers of fishing with Jesus.

Let's be honest, there's something about us that knows how to handle fishing failure, that wouldn't mind if this story ended in fishing futility. Something about us is downright comfortable with fishing all night without a bite, being in church all day with little to show for it--"That's how people are, you know, just won't come out for services, just won't give to the level we need, just ..." Something in us is content with Good Friday, but scared half out of our wits by Easter.

When we are scripted for failure and business as usual, having Jesus turn things around is, indeed, frightening.

Simon Peter may well have been happier had Jesus stuck to preaching that day, just as there are many who are more than happy to keep Jesus in church--but don't want him meddling with how they lead their lives in the workplace, or run their families and relationships. Religion is well and good in its place, is their perspective, so long as it knows its place.

But Jesus is pushy in that regard. He wants to be the Lord of all our lives, and he is not content to stay in the sanctuary. He wants to go fishing with us if we are fishermen. He wants to be invited into our bedrooms and our boardrooms, our classrooms and our gymnasiums, our offices and our factories.

Beware before you let him, because fishing with Jesus--or working with Jesus in the real day-to-day settings of our lives--can be quite disruptive. It certainly proved to be for Peter, James, and John.

One moment Peter is saying, "Get away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man." The next moment Peter is the one who is leaving, but it is not Jesus he is leaving it is his fishing business. Peter went from being a hard-headed businessman to being a fool for Christ. And though he may well have been quite baffled by what had overcome him, I doubt he ever felt more alive or engaged.

Fishing with Jesus. If he asks, will you row out a ways, away from the safety of the shore, into the deep waters?