

# “Letting Down the Nets”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – January 24, 2021*

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Epiphany

Psalm 90:1-2, 14-17

Rev. John Wahl

Luke 5:1-11

In today’s reading, Jesus’ first disciples – Simon (who Jesus also calls Peter), James and John – are called to become “fishers of men.” Luke’s is the only gospel that includes this story of the miraculous catch of fish; not just causing *some people* to catch *some fish*, but helping *professional fishers* to who have been fishing *all night without catching a single fish* to catch *two boats full of fish*; so many fish, in fact, that the boats begin to sink!

Whether you fish or not, the language of fishing courses through our everyday language. We talk about people *taking the bait, landing the big one, or swallowing hook, line, and sinker*. We may feel like *a fish out of water* or that *he/she is quite a catch*. And we might say, *there are plenty of fish in the sea* or that *smells fishy*.

Fishing was an important profession for those who lived in the region of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee – here called the Lake of Gennesaret – is 13 miles long and 7 miles at its widest. Historians estimate that, at the time of Jesus, over 200 boats would have fished there each day. Apart from lamb – that would have been eaten when Jesus and his disciples celebrated Passover – meat is seldom mentioned in the gospels. However, fish would have been their most common source of protein; a staple of their diets.<sup>1</sup>

One detail needs to be mentioned: near the end of chapter four – after Jesus escapes the angry mob in his hometown of Nazareth – Jesus returns to Capernaum, a neighboring town on the shores of the Sea. Among many miracles he performs is healing a woman – Simon’s mother-in-law – who was suffering from a high fever. Immediately, we are told, she got up and started to serve the people who had come to her house.

When Jesus encounters Simon Peter, James, and John, it takes place not in the synagogue, but outside in nature, on a jobsite. Jesus has gone out to where the people are; not expecting them to come to him. Luke tells us that a crowd by the lakeside is pressing in on him; wanting to hear what he had to say. Looking

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<sup>1</sup> James Campbell, “Biblical Fishing 101: Reeling in the First Fishers of Faith”

around, Jesus saw at least one familiar face – Simon – who is off to the side, washing his nets. In those days, fishermen used nets made of linen; and if they were not cleaned after using them, they would rot. Most fishing was done at night so that the fish would not see the nets and swim around them. In modern days, nylon nets prevent this problem, allowing fishing to be done during the daytime.

Thus, when Jesus asks Simon to take him out from the shore in the boat – so he could teach the people – Simon had already been up all night; tired from working and ready to head home. For whatever reason, Simon agrees to Jesus request; maybe thinking it an honor to have been chosen, or that this was as a way of saying thanks to Jesus for healing his mother-in-law.

After concluding his teaching, Jesus said to Simon, “put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Remember, work had just concluded; the nets had been washed and they were ready to go home. We soon learn that this had not been a productive night of fishing. Now, Jesus wants them to try again – in the daytime – and not only does this request commit Simon, but also his co-workers. Here they are, still in view of the crowds that had gathered to hear Jesus teach, faced with a decision. Would they fight off their fatigue, place trust in Jesus rather than in their own expertise, summon the imagination that casting their nets again would bring a different result, and risk looking like fools in front of their neighbors? Or would they, instead, decide to just go home?

Simon’s response – at the least the way it is translated for us – “if you say so, I will let down the nets,” is open to interpretation. Simon might have said this with a loud sigh, or a roll of the eyes; or, just as easily, it could have been a profound statement of faith. Jesus had already shown great power in his ability to heal and attract great crowds to hear him teach. Jesus had come to Simon’s workplace and selected him to play a part in his movement. Why not, if Jesus commanded it, listen and obey? Why not let down the nets and give it another shot?

Often, for us, answers to this question, “why not?” can be plentiful: not enough time, too little energy, a lack of experience or expertise. The potential of failure and the resultant shame, embarrassment, or regret. The relative safety we feel staying in the shallow waters rather than putting out into the deep.

What follows, of course, was a catch of fish so abundant that the nets began to break and the boats began to sink; so amazing that it causes Simon to fall to his knees. Whatever sinfulness that Simon recognizes in himself, it will never be enough to make Jesus go away. Instead, it will allow him to set aside even more – beyond his fatigue and previous failure – and follow Jesus.

When they finally make it to shore, hauling in this catch of a lifetime, Jesus says to the three fishermen, “Do not be afraid, from now on you will be catching people.” Jesus speaks in a language that they can understand. They hear this as a call on their lives; that they are not being asked to become something other than what they already are; instead, their vocation has become holy. Their skills and their persistence matter. After all, the real miracle is not a huge catch of fish, it is that they got back into the boat, put out to the deep waters, and dropped their nets again.

The Greek word that Jesus uses to describe fishing for people implies that the disciples will be netting them – catching them alive. Even if people-fishing does not use lures and hooks to reel people in, the metaphor of fishing for people can be problematic. Fish don’t want to be caught; they are not being saved for something better; for them, it’s their worst day.<sup>2</sup>

Fishing is an aggressive act; it restricts the freedom of those we are pursuing. And yet, it is also possible to view Jesus’ call to discipleship in a positive light. Jesus tells, and shows, Simon, James, and John that if they have faith – in their own abilities and in where Jesus is leading them – then they can accomplish amazing things. Fishing for people is not coercive or domineering. The fruit of the disciples’ new task will be the relationships formed with people caught in the wide net of God’s abundance and grace.

In the final verse in this passage, Luke tells us that the three fishermen “left everything and followed (Jesus).” Instead of taking their abundant haul of fish to sell at the market, they leave it all behind. If we think about who these fishermen were – people at the bottom of the social heap, struggling day-to-day to put food on the table, forced to give the first part of any catch in taxes to support an occupying empire – if we think about their position, then hearing Jesus announce a new kingdom, a new reign of justice, might sound quite exciting; it might be quite attractive to drop everything to see what Jesus might offer. Leaving it all behind might sound like good news, indeed.

So, what does this mean for us; for people who are mostly not in that situation, but are surrounded by people who are? What about all the people living paycheck-to-paycheck, or gig workers who don’t have a steady paycheck to rely on, or the millions of people who have lost jobs over the past year and are now slipping into debt, poverty, homelessness, or hunger? What can leaving everything behind mean for people who have little or no hope? For those of us who have been called to reach out with a message of hope?

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<sup>2</sup> Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bibleworm Podcast*

If Simon had a mother-in-law, that meant he had a wife and – quite possibly – children that he supported by fishing. Would it have been responsible for him to follow Jesus and pretend they didn't exist? Or does leaving everything behind to follow Jesus mean something else? Leaving everything behind could mean setting aside fear for faith; leaving everything behind might require moving into deeper waters and dropping nets even when we don't know if it will result in a big catch. Leaving everything behind means being able to enact good news – to live into the new kingdom Jesus announces – by saying to God, “if you say so, why not?”<sup>3</sup>

Let us, therefore, open ourselves to God's empowering us to seize these opportunities to share our time and love and resources with people in our community who are hurting. There will be days when we are tired, feel like a failure, have doubts, and believe we are unequal to the task at hand. But, if we learn nothing else from the gospels – from Jesus who turns water into wine, and heals the sick, and feeds the multitudes – it is that God gives lavishly; and that, as Paul says, God is “able to accomplish abundantly more than all we can ask or imagine.” (Ephesians 3:20)

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Bob Ekblad, “Jesus' Recruiting Strategy”