

“Not a Fish Story”
Epiphany 5c
Luke 5:1-11

Pastor Bruce K Modahl
Grace Lutheran Church
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In Jesus' Name.

One summer, while in seminary, I worked as chaplain at the Flaming Arrow Boy Scout Reservation in Lake Wales, Florida. In the Scout Chaplain's handbook was an outline for a service that was modeled on what Jesus did in today's gospel reading. In the Scout handbook this was called the Lakeside Vesper service. The scouts were to gather at dusk by the edge of the lake. The chaplain was to put out a little ways from the shore in a rowboat. The handbook suggested that it would be best if you could so arrange it that the sun was setting over your shoulder as you stood up in the boat to conduct the service. I never did that. I went down to the waterfront once or twice and thought about it, but, somehow standing up in a rowboat even with the anchor thrown out did not seem like a good idea. We had a perfectly lovely and safe chapel for services. Besides that, I never had a mass of Boy Scouts crowding in on me at the edge of any of the lakes at Flaming Arrow and we had three of them.

The crowd pressing in on Jesus is the reason he got in the boat. He had the good sense to sit down to teach. When he got done teaching he told Peter, “Head out into deep water and let down your nets.” Peter replied, “Master, we have been fishing all night and we caught nothing.” What went unsaid was, “I'm dead tired. We threw nets out and hauled nets in all night. We just finished cleaning our nets and now we shall have to clean them again. And for what? We caught nothing during the night when the fish are schooling and feeding. We will catch nothing this morning under the hot sun. We are the fishermen. What does Jesus know about fishing?” Maybe Peter was not thinking all of this, but I'm thinking it for him. They are the obvious objections. This was only the beginning of Jesus telling Peter how to fish. The words out of Peter's mouth are “At your word, I will let down the nets.” There is a message in here to us about obedience to Jesus in spite of our objections.

You heard what happened. He gave the order. Down went the nets. They snagged so many fish the nets were in danger of breaking. Peter signaled the other boat to come and help. Even so there were enough fish to press both boats low in the water. Jesus goes from a crowd of people to a crowd of fish.

What do you make of Peter's reaction? He fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Depart from me Lord for I am a sinful man." His reaction is similar to those of Isaiah and Paul in the other readings this morning. Granted Isaiah's experience of God's glory, a temple filled with the hem of God's robe and the wings of fiery seraphs, is more fulsome than Peter's experience of nets full of fish. Isaiah says, "Woe is me! I am lost for I am a man of unclean lips...." Will there be anything left of him once the unclean is purged away? Even that experience pales in comparison to the risen Jesus appearing to Paul. He calls himself "one untimely born, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." Faced with God's generosity and grace and power they are faced also with their own unworthiness. Jesus said to Peter, "Do not be afraid." The same grandeur of God that brought Peter, Isaiah, and Paul to their knees also lifted them up to serve. Jesus said to him, "From now on you will be catching not fish but people."

Our text ends, "When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed Jesus." Sometimes it is in what scripture does not say that we find the significance of the event. Sometimes the silences, the pauses, the unsupplied details are important. Isn't there a question that occurs to you? What about all those fish? Fish mean money in their pockets. A big, double-boat load of fish mounded up and pulled up to shore and what, they walk away, leaving those fish to broil under the Galilean sun.

Up to this point we have the makings of a good fish story. But for it to be a fish story they would measure the big ones, count all of them, and sell them in the marketplace. Peter would brag to us about how much money he made on that big haul of fish, thanks be to God. We know this is not a fish story when we realize that what happened between verses 11 and 12 is they left all those fish behind without another thought. We abandon them at the shore, free for the taking, another sign of God's generous abundance. This is a story about people who set aside the life they had planned in order to take up the life God offered them.

This past week I heard about a man who works in the development office of a good-sized not-for-profit organization. He was winding up his career. He had his retirement planned. He received a call from a search firm asking if he would be interested in being considered for the position of executive director of Christian Appalachian Ministries. That is the organization where he began his career and he had a soft spot in his heart for it. But he explained that no, he wasn't interested. He and his wife had their retirement all planned. A little time went by and he got a call

from the search firm asking if he would reconsider and consider being considered for the director's position of Christian Appalachian Ministries. He said, "Thank you, but no thank you. I've got my retirement all planned." A little more time went by and he received a third call from the search firm asking him a third time and for a third time he declined the invitation saying he and his wife had their plans all made. More time went by and he received a call from chair of the board of Christian Appalachian Ministries informing him that the board had elected him their executive director and would he accept the position?" He said, "Give me some time to talk to my wife." Five days later he called back to accept the position. In explaining himself to his co-workers he quoted Joseph Campbell, who said something to the effect, "We must be willing to get rid of the life we've planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us."

This is not meant as an excuse for laziness. There are some people who wait for opportunity to be handed to them. People in my generation spent time trying to find themselves. So-and-So dropped out of school. Why was that? Oh, he's trying to find himself. That sort of talk caused great frustration to a generation of parents. "What does that mean?" they wanted to know.

In this economy there are people around us in these pews who have lost jobs. They might be thinking, "The life I had planned is gone. Ok, God, I'm ready for the life you have waiting for me. Bring it on. I'm open to Plan B." I believe God does have good things planned for you. It doesn't happen as quickly as these accounts are told in the bible or vignettes are recounted from life. You are in deep water, trusting God.

That is where Jesus calls us. The life Jesus has waiting for us is life with him on this side of baptism. There are only a few inches of water in the font, but in that water we are plunged into Jesus' death. We return to those depths with every confession of sins. Sometimes we say the words of the confession just because it is there in the worship folder and everyone else is doing it. Yes we know we are sinners in principle but at the moment we are not feeling any particular need for it. But every Sunday there are some who gather here who are worn out with their unworthiness. It is for their sakes that we all rise for the confession. Sometimes we are the ones who know beyond the shadow of a doubt that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. We are the ones who desperately need to hear, "In the mercy of almighty God, Jesus Christ was given to die for us and for his sake, God forgives us all our sins." The same power of God that puts us on our knees lifts us up.

There are some Sundays when the words spoken and sung at communion are ho-hum, we've heard that before. But there are other times when it seems the River Jordan has narrowed and with it the distance between this life and the life to come, those other times when it seems the dense curtain separating the holy of holies has become sheer and we can almost hear our mother's lovely alto and our father laboring to sing on key. It is all we can do to choke back our tears and join them and the fiery seraphim singing, "Holy Lord, God of power and might. Heaven and earth are full of your glory." The same power of God that puts us on our knees lifts us up.

The deep water is trusting God out where our toes don't touch. It is where we follow Jesus to catch those who are thrashing and sinking. It is where we trust God with our lives and, as Jesus did, also with our deaths. In deep water we trust in the God who raised Jesus from the grave and promises to raise us as well.

In retrospect I'm thinking I should have stepped out of the safe chapel at Flaming Arrow and onto the rowboat. What's a little risk like that when we are joined to Jesus, to his death and his resurrection? What's a little risk like that when compared to Peter who stood up to preach in front of the Pentecost crowd, lectured the same council that sentenced Jesus to death, and survived the first church convention? What's a little risk like that when compared to those who lose jobs and yet witness to the abundance of God's gifts, or the witness of those who sit vigil at the beds of those who are dying, and who mock death by singing "I know that my redeemer lives"? What indeed? This certainly is not a fish story, but a story about Jesus who puts us on our knees and lifts us up to follow him into the depths.