

February 10, 2019 Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
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GOSPEL

Luke 5:1-11

The holy gospel according to Saint Luke, the fifth chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

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

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Sometimes, it is too easy to hear the Bible’s stories of God’s abundance...
and to look around and compare it to our scarcity...
to see it as a storybook too far away
from the earth we walk and the days we live.

I don't know if it is true for you...

but some days I hear Scripture as an encouragement...

a source of hope in what is possible.

And then there are days when it seems like what it does

is throw into sharp relief the difference between my world and life
and the times when miracles were possible...

and followers of Jesus were gathered up by the thousands
in matters of days or hours...

and people were healed...

and raging seas were silenced.

This overwhelming catch of fish in Luke today shows us again the power of Jesus to make possible what seems impossible. And we wonder...is the impossible still possible now? And even if it is, is it possible for me?

Of course...maybe there is also more to it than that. There almost always is.

It is interesting to imagine what Simon, James and John first thought when Jesus interrupted their morning routine to share the expertise of a carpenter...on how to catch fish. Not knowing very much about ancient fishing practices, this background to the action that is about to play out, may not be striking. But it is, in fact, a very odd...and even kind of maddening...thing that Jesus asks them to do.

A commentary I read describes the daily routine of someone fishing the Sea of Galilee in that time:

“Trammel netting,” it says, “was the fishing technique used on the Sea of Galilee in Jesus’ day, when fishermen worked at night...and cleaned their nets early in the morning... Fishermen started at dusk, tying together lengths of double- or triple-layered nets and then rowing out to deep water a moderate distance from shore. They dropped their nets to form a crescent-shaped wall just where the water deepened. The nets were held in place by rocks tied to the bottom and a cork tied to the top.

The fishermen then paddled quietly back to the shore. After a while, they started making a huge racket by shouting, slapping oars on the water and stomping on the bottom of their boats. This scared the fish, whose instinct was to dive down and out of the shallow water toward the deep water, directly into the waiting nets. Because the nets were laid at night, the fish didn't see them and became hopelessly entangled in the middle layer. The fishermen then hauled the nets onto their boats or dragged them onto shore.

After removing the catch, fishermen repeated this process of loading up the net, setting it in place, rowing back to shore, shouting and then hauling the net—as many as 10 times a night. By morning, they would have been exhausted from their work. Still, they had to clean the nets of any mud or fish parts that might alert the next night's catch of the net's presence. The nets were hung up to dry all day while the fishermen rested for their next night of work.”

<https://www.livinglutheran.org/2019/02/lectionary-blog-fishing-for-humans/?fbclid=IwAR3FsjUic9UKpP4QFr3-AeNXdX2tG2MEBbREI2vPzp-0k8-jBJf1shiBS5Q>

Jesus has caught Simon, James, and John at the end of a long night of rowing in and out, untangling empty nets...and shouting at the empty water. I can imagine they were exhausted and in no mood for nonsense.

After they are well into their morning routine of cleaning and drying their nets, Jesus interrupts, and asks them to do something absurd...to row out and drop their nets into the deep waters...now...in daylight...when the fish can see exactly what they are doing...like the roadrunner looking over Wile E. Coyote's shoulder while he paints the train tunnel on the side of the cliff face.

Yet, they humor him.

He sends them to deeper waters...with a nonsense plan...and they follow instructions. And they haul in a huge catch of fish.

And then, after showing he has some sort of magical predication ability or fish-charming power or something...Jesus suddenly tells them their not going to be doing *that* anymore. Now it's time to try something completely different, and gather up people instead.

I don't know about you...but I'd have asked Jesus to help with the fish for at least a few more days.

An abundance like that can feel like such a fairy tale...so far removed from our lives. We can imagine how different our world is from theirs, but in doing that, we might miss how it is the same. The abundance...the full to breaking nets...isn't where the story started. The scarcity is in their story, too...if we've been paying attention...right? The story of the bursting nets came after a night of catching nothing, after all. Simon, James and John have spent all night shouting at an empty sea before Jesus comes to the shore.

And he sends them out to deep water...deep water is a place full of wonder and terror...like standing on the edge of a canyon...It is a place where we come close to the edge of true mystery...the unknowable...the unseeable. Even now, on earth, the deepest waters on our planet are less understood by humanity than outer space. The deep water is the possibility we do not know...It is, we also imagine, the home of the danger we fear...

I wonder what living and working at the edges of deep water meant to Simon and James and John. Some people learn to dance more closely on the edge of the mystery than I know how.

And they dance right out to that edge, and haul in an abundance they didn't think was possible.

I wonder if Jesus is standing by the shore now...telling the churches as we clean our nets...that we should try something a little outlandish...something different than the pattern we've learned for all these many years of rowing in and out along a familiar patch of water.

I wonder...if the church can be like Simon and James and John...and put aside our sense of expertise...and listen to the bold call to go back out...to the edge of mystery...and use the tools we have in ways we haven't tried.

I wonder if the church is like that...I wonder how I am like that, too...in my own life...too certain of my own expertise to be told to try something new...or risky...or strange...to let go of my sense that I know how to do this...which, if I'm honest...is pretty much of a front I put up anyway to hide the fact that I don't know what I'm doing a lot of the time, at all.

I wonder, if we can find hope inside our exhaustion...if we can hear the voice of God...I wonder what might happen next for us...what totally new work lies just beyond God's strange calling.

Perhaps you have felt the abundance of answering that kind of call pour into your life already, pulling you off balance with its overwhelming goodness. Or perhaps, you are still out in an empty boat in the middle of the night...or cleaning your empty nets in the morning...with your arms sore and your voice hoarse from shouting at the empty water to give you enough to survive.

Either way, one thing is certain...Jesus is waiting on the shore. You are not alone. The book isn't closed. It isn't just long ago and far away. And there is a chapter waiting to be written. And you and Jesus are both in it. So it is bound to be strange...and hilarious...and hard...and truly good.

May it be so for you, for the church, and for all God's beloved creation.

Amen.