



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR  
THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, FEBRUARY 9, 2025  
ISAIAH 6:1-8; PSALM 138; 1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-11; LUE 5:1-11

## DEEPER WATER



About a year before I finished seminary, my bishop told me he was thinking of assigning me to a church in northwest Arkansas after I was ordained, and he wanted me to visit incognito to just how I felt about that potential placement.

We were making the trip that summer to drop the kids at church camp, and so we

made the trek from Texas to Springdale on a Saturday. The kids were restless from the long drive, so as soon as we checked into the hotel, they and Kathy headed for the swimming pool, and I drove down to the church just to see it. I didn't expect anyone to be there on a Saturday.

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<sup>1</sup> [Let Down Your Nets](#), by John August Swanson.

There was a car in the parking lot, so I went to the front door of the church, which was unlocked. A few steps into the narthex the security alarm went off, a deafening siren and computerized voice declaring “Warning. Intruder. Warning. Intruder.”

I tried calling the number on the alarm company decal posted on the front window... “The number you have dialed is no longer in service.”

I waited for someone to show up, but no one did. The alarm had cycled off, leaving me in quiet solitude to contemplate next steps. I wrote a note of explanation and wedged it in the front doors, and drove off, which is when the police showed up.

“License and registration please.” “Officer, I am to be this church’s new priest.” He didn’t buy it. He called backup who searched the building while he ran warrant checks.

Eventually, the church’s junior warden showed up. He just happened to be driving by and noticed two police cars in the church lot. He had never met me, didn’t even know I was coming, but he vouched for me anyway. I was released to his custody.

The next day the word of my first foray into St. Thomas had spread through the congregation, to everyone’s great delight but mine. The bishop had told me to be discreet.

At my installation as their priest the next year, they had a good laugh and presented me with the keys to the church as a symbol of my authorized access to the building.

I share this story for three reasons really: first, we are, it seems to me, in need of a little levity in these challenging times that can take us to somber places all too readily. Let humor be the antidote to despair. Humor helps grief in perspective, and surely we are all grieving in these days.

Secondly, this story serves as a keen reminder that I have a lot of privilege in life. Not every person would have had the same experience or outcomes as I did that day, released by the police, no worse for the wear, and warmly embraced by the congregation the next morning and eventually as their priest.

In these times, when some cannot stop for groceries or pick their children up from school without fear of being whisked away, I am aware of my privilege.

In these times, when some among us fear losing their access to needed medical care, or child care, or a job that puts food on their family’s table, or access to safe workplaces that honor diversity, equity and inclusion, I am aware of my privilege to work in a place that does value these things.

In these times, when some cannot devote any energy to important matters such as climate change or funding for international relief work because they are just trying to survive today, I am aware that it is a privilege to have time and energy to consider such things.

That doesn't mean we don't focus on such things; we do, because these are the ways we are called to be disciples of Jesus in this time. But let us do so, holding it all lightly enough that there is space in our hearts for those who cannot join us in this important work at this moment.

Which brings me to my third reason for sharing this light-hearted story with you this morning. That experience serves to remind me (and maybe all of us) that whatever designs I might have for my Christian ministry need to always come with a measure of humility if it is to be faithfully engaged. Left to my own devices, I will foul it up, but trusting God to bless me in it can be the catalyzing force for good and life-giving ministry.

This is the theme of today's scriptures: Isaiah says he is a man of unclean lips, unworthy to be God's prophet, but God has plans for him, nevertheless. We still look to Isaiah nearly three millennia later for prophetic inspiration because he said yes to God.

Paul says he's unfit to be called an apostle of Christ, but by God's grace he is what he is. And we are still looking to him for hope and guidance twenty centuries on.

And Peter, exhausted by a night's worth of fruitless fishing, has his heart turned by Jesus who asks him to put out to deeper water (a symbolic invitation to ministry, mind you), and on sight of the haul of nets teeming with fish, he tells Jesus to go away from him; he is a sinful man. The Greek word for "sinful" here is *hamartia*, literally a mistake or defective. Jesus immediately and resolutely waives that notion off, and says come on, Peter, we've got work to do. And we understand the Church was built upon the firm foundation of Peter's courageous yes.

If we are expecting the work of the kingdom to be done only by those who are somehow pure or pious enough to have it all together, we will be waiting for a long time, friends.

Last Saturday at the vestry's retreat, we had a lively conversation about all the good ministries at Saint Mark's. Some 80+ ways of being disciples of Christ. We don't sew quilts or serve meals or usher or sing in the choir to be busy doing something; these are all ways of living into the gospel story, here and now, and following Jesus in our own right. You figure out what that means for you, but know

that Jesus is inviting you to get in the boat with him, and put out to deeper water.

That we do so together, as community, means we can encourage each other as find our way together.

If ever there was a time to put out into deeper water with Jesus, this is the time. Not because we have it all figured out, but because Jesus

looks our way and waives off any notion that our imperfections render our ministry invalid, and says let's go.

You are my disciples here and now. Let's go!

The Church was made for such a time as this!

**Luke 5:1-11** [*Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. 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. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. 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. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and 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." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.]*



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