



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON JENNIFER KING DAUGHERTY, CANON FOR CONGREGATIONAL LIFE
THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY, FEBRUARY 10, 2019
ISAIAH 6:1-13; PSALM 138; 1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-11; LUKE 5:1-11

FEAR AND CALLING

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.]*

When I was in the Holy Land last month, we spent much of the first three days traveling around Lake Gennesaret, the location of our gospel story today. It's also known in the Bible as the Sea of Galilee or the Sea of Tiberias -- all names for the large, oval lake in the north of the country about twice the size of Lake Washington. When we were

there, the weather was sunny and still and the lake was calm and sparkling. At the water's edge, you could see the smooth rocks in the shallows and hear the soft lapping of the water on the shore. Most of the development of the area is set back from the lake, so when you look east across it, the view of the gracious trees and gently sloping

hills could be from the 1st century. It is a beautiful place.

A lot happened around Lake Gennesaret in Jesus's early ministry. At the north end, in the synagogue in Capernaum – whose ancient ruins I visited – Jesus heals a man with an unclean spirit. Then he visits Simon Peter's house and heals his mother-in-law from a terrible fever. When the people of Capernaum see this, they try to persuade Jesus to stay. But he says, "No -- I need to go. I have to spread the good news of God's kingdom to other cities too. That's why I'm here."

But first, as we heard today, he goes to Lake Gennesaret and calls the first disciples. The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke tell this story in a very similar way. As Jesus walks along the lake, he sees four fishermen -- Simon, Andrew, James, John – two pairs of brothers. Depending on the gospel, they're casting their nets, mending them, or washing them. Jesus says to them, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of people." And immediately they leave their nets, their family -- everything -- and follow him. In every gospel, it is a decisive story.

But only in Luke's gospel do we have the miraculous prologue we heard today about nets bursting with fish. So that's the story I want to focus on.

The day starts out like so many others. The fishermen pull into shore after a long night of work with nothing to show for it. Maybe they are a little worried about arriving empty-handed at home, but it can't have been the first time. They're fishermen, after all. That's the way it goes. They know what to do -- beach the boats, wash the nets, get some sleep, and try again the next day. Perhaps they don't even notice the people starting to gather on the shore of the lake.

And then it's a day like no other. Jesus gets in Simon Peter's boat and tells him to move out so that Jesus can teach – his voice carrying over the water, amplified to reach the growing crowds. And when he finishes, this carpenter tells the expert fishermen to go back out – into the deep. Peter resists, "Master, please. We just got back from a lousy night of fishing." But he goes and the results are beyond their wildest dreams – they literally "ensnare an immense multitude of fish" -- so many that their nets begin to tear.

Peter's response is surprisingly emotional. He falls at Jesus' knees and pleads, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." He's already seen Jesus heal his own mother-in-law, so there must be something about this miraculous catch – something that he could never accomplish on his own -- that breaks his heart open and shows Peter the truth

about Jesus and about himself. He knows Jesus as “Lord” now, not just “Master.” And he sees his own brokenness in a profoundly humbling way. It is as if the light in Jesus reveals Peter’s hidden shadows, and Peter can’t bear it.

But Jesus doesn’t see Peter’s sinfulness. He sees fear. And as always, he responds, “Do not be afraid.” Then he points Peter to the future, “From now on, you will be catching people.” So Peter is walloped by his own limits and brokenness, but Jesus comforts him and calls him to a new way of being.

It makes me wonder, “What is this connection between fear and calling?”

First, what is Peter afraid of? The enormous catch is astounding, but I don’t think it’s the multitude of fish that frighten him. Maybe it’s something about the holy awe Peter experiences when his whole world is turned upside down and he recognizes Jesus as “Lord”.

Now he knows that his daily existence is infused with God’s power. Now he knows that abundant life lies beyond his entrenched routine. Maybe it is frightening because once Peter knows this, he cannot unknow it. He can’t go back to being satisfied with empty nets. He wants more – more life, more truth, more closeness to the holy. It is frightening, but Jesus banishes

those fears. So, it’s not surprising that when he returns to shore, Peter leaves everything and follows Jesus.

I wonder about our fears and how they get in the way of calling. I’m thinking of the anxiety and paralysis that shut away inconvenient dreams and longings and stop us from venturing into the unknown. Because very often call emerges from a sense of restlessness or dissatisfaction. Or from a yearning that doesn’t go away no matter how “fine” things are. And that can be frightening. Because once we really know our deepest desires and truest selves – the ones created in the image of God – we cannot unknow them. And that might mean letting go of a lot of predictability.

One of a priest’s greatest privileges is to listen to people’s stories and struggles and glimpse the Holy Spirit at work. Often someone says, “I never would have thought I’d be wanting this or doing this. Such a thing has always frightened me. What is happening?” We say this about relationships, work, study, travel, service, speaking, leadership. Places where fear and longing meet. It happens as we step out into justice work, like racial reconciliation, advocacy for those experiencing homelessness, refugee rights. It happens when we let ourselves be free in spiritual exploration by knowing our own spiritual

autobiography, and grounding it in Bible study and prayer.

There are so many places where our fears mask deep yearning and potential.

But Jesus says, “Do not be afraid. I will transform you.”

The first disciples were transformed from being fishermen to fishers of people. They took up the invisible net which Jesus had already cast to gather them in and offered

the good news of God’s mercy and love in their own time and place.

That’s what we’re about, too. We are gathered in that net. Our daily existence is infused with God’s power. Abundant life lies beyond what can feel like an entrenched routine.

We cannot unknow it. We can only follow Jesus.

Amen.



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