

**+ Luke 5:1-11 + Jesus Goes Fishing + Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany + 7 February 2010 +**

The morning sun made the water of Lake Gennesaret sparkle. The fishermen were exhausted. Time to clean the nets. Simon Peter and his partners, James and John, and their helpers had gone all night tossing their large nets again and again out into the water to catch fish, but unfortunately they returned to shore that morning with nothing. As they untangled their nets, they couldn't help, but notice a growing crowd of people just down the shore from them buzzing around a rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth.

Now Simon, James, and John had followed Jesus for a short time weeks before when the crowds weren't buzzing around him. They had followed him around Galilee and even down to Judea. He was an amazing teacher. He taught with an authority unlike any of the other teachers of the Law. Those teachers always quoted this or that rabbi, but not Jesus. He spoke as if he were God's prophet...or God himself. Others had noticed too.

They had been with Jesus when he changed water into wine at a local wedding. They saw Jesus cast out a demon at the local synagogue. Simon recently had Jesus over to his house. While there, Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law of a fever. Others were noticing the miracles too and wondering about this Jesus, but Simon, James and John went back to fishing until that beautiful day by the seashore.

While they wearily cleaned their nets, Jesus was trying to teach ***"the word of God"***, but the crowds were pushing and pressing each other around just to hear him. It wasn't an ideal setting for teaching. He needed a different place to teach. About that time Jesus noticed the fishing boats belonging to Simon, James, and John pulled up on shore. So Jesus got into Simon's boat and ***"asked him to put out a little from shore."*** Simon obliged and from there Jesus sat and taught the eager throng of listeners.

When he was finished, Jesus said to Simon, ***"Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch."*** Simon, weary and a little frustrated from the fruitless night before, had some misgivings. ***"Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."*** It was mid-afternoon—a time when the sun was high and no fisherman would go out to the deep water for a catch, but Simon and his helpers took the boat out to the deep water anyway. Simon trusted Jesus enough to take him at his word in spite of his misgivings. After all, what did a carpenter-turned-rabbi know about fishing?

As soon as they lowered the nets, however, a huge school of fish literally leaped in. The weight was so great that the nets began to tear. Simon signaled to his partners James and John, who brought their boat over to help haul in the fish, but soon both boats were so full ***"they began to sink"***. All this time, Jesus was there in Simon's boat. Who was this Jesus?

As the fish began to sink his boat, Simon realized Jesus was more than a rabbi and a fisherman. Simon was not overjoyed at the tremendous catch of fish, but filled with fear. Simon realized that he, a sinful human being, was in the presence of the holy God, who alone could accomplish such a miracle. If the holy God was there, then Simon could not stay there, for no sinful man could remain in the presence of the holy God and live. So Simon Peter fell at Jesus' knees and begged, ***"Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"*** James and John could only look on in stunned silence, when Jesus did something surprising. He told Simon, ***"Don't be afraid..."***

With those words, Jesus removed Simon's fear and guilt and transformed the unclean into the clean. With those words, Jesus did for Simon what God had done for Isaiah, when he was called to serve as the Lord's prophet. Jesus cleansed Simon's heart and lips with his gracious forgiveness and the sweet good news of the Gospel, as he had done for Isaiah and Moses and Joshua and Gideon and Jeremiah, as he would do for all the other disciples, for Paul, and even John years later in his old age.

Then Jesus gave the forgiven fisherman a mission. ***"...From now on you will catch men alive."*** Simon's career as a fisherman was over, as it was for James and John. Instead they would follow Jesus all the rest of their days. They would see the Lord perform far greater miracles than a great catch of fish. They would see him heal the sick, give sight to the blind, and raise the dead. They would see how his Word always works on hearts, as it creates faith in the hearts of many and is rejected in many others. They would hear Jesus promise suffering and death for himself at the hands of enemies, and see it fulfilled. They would hear Jesus promise to take that life back up again, and see him do it. One day they would be "fishers of men" casting out the same net of the Gospel to bring in a great catch of souls for the Lord. ***"So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him."*** Jesus went fishing and changed their lives forever.

When Jesus goes fishing, he changes our lives forever too. One thing we need to remember that the disciples had to learn that beautiful day by the sea is that **Jesus' equipment always works**. His fishing equipment doesn't involve rods or reels, nets or line or lures, but instead he uses his Holy Word to catch souls, not by deception, but for salvation.

Let's take a closer look at that equipment. Like a fish finder in a boat or the intuition of an experienced stream fisherman, Jesus always knows where to go. He goes where the people are. He went to the crowds to teach them the Word of God. Later Jesus explained the reason why through his Apostle Paul, **"Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ."** Saving faith could only come through hearing the Word. In a sense, Jesus was fishing long before Simon threw out his net. When Jesus went to Simon, James, and John, he used a miracle to teach them that his Word really works. In a sense, he was preparing them for the great catch of souls that would happen as they cast out the net of the Gospel. Jesus comes to you and me where we're at—male, female, young, old, married, single, widowed, rich, poor. He comes with the same message, but maybe gets it or got it to us in different ways—a friend's conversation, an unexpected invitation, a caring relative, a pastor's sermon.

As Jesus comes to us, he uses equipment tested and proven to work every time. He uses the Word. The Law cuts and kills our hearts as it condemns our selfish and secret sins, our public and personal disobedience of his holy will. The Gospel, then, heals and revives as the forgiving balm of the Good News of a Savior brings life to dead hearts. That Word reminds you that all your sins are forgiven, even the sins of your youth still weighing on your conscience or the sins of weakness that plague you daily or the sins of pride that always lead to your fall. The Word of Christ has proven to be trustworthy time and again over the centuries, catching souls like ours to live for eternity.

Now you might wonder, "...But wait a second. Not everyone who hears the Word of God becomes a believer. Many reject him!" That's true. Humanity still retains the awful ability to reject God and his Word, but even so, the net of the Word always comes back with a catch of living, forgiven saints. The Lord explains through his prophet Isaiah, **"As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."** He caught you and me after all.

Jesus has a better record than any other fisherman ever. Plus all of his fish end up living forever! That's pretty remarkable, but there's something just as remarkable. When Jesus goes fishing, **he never fishes alone**.

Oh, he could! He has the equipment and ability to do so. In fact, he had even been preaching solo for a time before he got to the shores of Galilee. He doesn't need to call and train fellow "fishers of men", but in his grace, Jesus chooses to bring his friends along. Remember what he told Simon, **"Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men."** Jesus had a special mission for those who followed him, and he still does. In the meantime, Jesus doesn't abandon his friends, but can always be found by their side as he promised, **"Surely I am with you always to the very end of the age."**

He also lets his friends use his equipment. Simon, James, and John would get to use his Word to catch people, so they might live. Friends, you and I have that same Word, that same equipment, to share with people we know. It's a powerful and proven Word we get to use, so powerful that even through a simple conversation with a friend about Jesus, the Lord can bring in fish we would never expect to be part of his great catch.

Now the equipment we get to use—that Word of God—is very old and we might be tempted to try some trendy lure to catch people for Christ, but then we only end up fishing for ourselves. So does that old equipment still work even centuries after Jesus chose his first fishers of men? Or perhaps you're even afraid to use that old equipment thinking you might use it wrong or wouldn't know how to use it. Perhaps you might even feel unworthy to use such powerful and holy equipment because of your sinfulness.

Listen again to the words of Christ, the Great Fisherman, to Simon, **"Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men."** Leave your fears at the foot of the cross. Leave your worries and your temptations and your guilt there too, because Christ calls sinners to share his Gospel. He works through fumbling, stumbling lips of sinners like you and me. Live in his Word so it becomes part of your everyday speech and life, and know that when Jesus goes fishing with you and me, there's no need to fear. His equipment, his Word always works. So now, dear fishers of men, let's follow him. Amen.