

Year C Epiphany 5 Luke 5 1 to 11

Here we have the calling of the first disciples in the Gospel of Luke. When Peter witnesses the miracle of the massive haul of fish from waters where, all through the night, there had been no fish, rather than rejoicing, he seems greatly distressed. He falls on his knees and proclaims his sinfulness to Jesus. And then, when the boat hits the shore, Simon (who we later know as Peter) and his two partners – James and John – drop everything, quit their livelihood, and follow Jesus. All of this can sound more than a little baffling and unrealistic to our modern ears. Sure, they just made a spectacular haul seemingly thanks to this charismatic teacher, but why leave the fish in the nets and head off with this stranger? Why not enjoy the benefits – and income – from this astounding catch of fish? A little exploration of this passage will help us get to the bottom of these questions.

Let us notice, first of all, that Peter, James, and John are not encountering a total stranger for the first time. Luke tells us, time and again, that Jesus is going about teaching. Accompanying his teaching have been healings. In the countryside of Galilee, news of this astounding teacher has been spreading. Luke begins today's story by, yet again, pointing out that Jesus is teaching. Even though Luke does not tell us what Jesus is teaching, we know what it is about. In his hometown synagogue, Jesus laid it all out for us. He is the anointed one who will bring about the perfection of God's kingdom – healing the sick, lifting up the poor, freeing the oppressed (4:18-21) – and he tells us that he is going to go about all the towns of Galilee, proclaiming this good news of the kingdom of God (4:43). In fact, Jesus has already been to Peter's home and has healed his sick mother-in-law. Jesus climbs into Peter's boat today to thrill the gathered crowd with more of his acclaimed teaching and, when he follows this up with the miracle of the huge catch of fish, this is all just too much for an amazed and humble fisherman. Although this is not the moment when Peter names Jesus as the Son of God, the implication is here. Peter falls on his knees and proclaims Jesus as "Lord." He has heard Jesus teaching about God's kingdom. He has heard Jesus saying that he has brought the kingdom and will bring the perfection of this kingdom. And now, Peter knows this to be true. Peter accepts Jesus as his Lord.

We do not hear the amazing things Jesus is saying about the kingdom as Peter did. But, Luke makes sure that we still know the amazing things about the kingdom by painting us a picture with his story. When Jesus turns to Simon Peter in the boat, Jesus tells him to go out into deep waters to let down his nets. The mention of “deep” waters suggests the presence of unexplored possibilities, the presence of areas of potential beyond our human perception of the limits. Peter tells Jesus of the scarcity and of the limits he has experienced – they’ve fished all night and have caught nothing – but, in the same breath, Peter expresses the willingness to explore the possibility that Jesus has placed before him and try again.

The response to Peter’s willingness is immediate – They suddenly have more fish than two boats can handle. The act of God here tells us that God’s kingdom is a place of abundant provision. “A large catch of fish represents stability and care, support, and having enough. It is a physical manifestation of having one’s needs met” (Kendra Mohn, workingpreacher.org). We can celebrate with the overwhelmed and overjoyed fishermen that they have been given their daily bread. This is no small thing in that context or in ours. With so many facing food insecurity and months of winter still to come, the miraculous gift of abundant food would be received with joy and thanksgiving.

The size of the catch means that their needs will be met into the future as well. “This is food enough to sell so that the fishermen will have resources beyond today. They can eat again tomorrow. And, the food that is sold becomes daily sustenance to others. So, while the large catch of fish conveys provision and plenty for Simon Peter and his partners, it also signals a world beyond these fishermen and their immediate needs” (Kendra Mohn, workingpreacher.org). The obvious surplus does away with the instinct to hoard grocery items and hide food away from others. In this story, Luke has the whole community in mind. In God’s kingdom, everyone has enough.

Jesus, after providing the abundant gift, tells the fishermen they are being called as disciples. From now on, he tells them, they will catch people. With these words, he is telling them that who they are – fishermen, in this case – is all that

they need to be with him in God's kingdom. The disciples will now participate with Jesus in the gathering work of reconciling all things to God. The disciples will proclaim Jesus' message of good news about God's kingdom and they will spread the news about Jesus, the anointed one of God. The disciples will follow Jesus and become, like him, the leaders and servers of others.

The truly amazing thing about this passage is that we see and experience the beginnings of the Church. We watch as Jesus starts the formation of the community of believers that we are today. Jesus gathers disciples to him just as we are gathered still today by Jesus through the presence of the Holy Spirit. This Gospel story is our story. In many ways, Luke is telling us the story of the Church.

As with the passage we heard in Isaiah, this Gospel story contains many elements of our worship experience because our worship experience is based on the Scriptures. Just as Peter, James, and John did then, we hear the teachings of Christ when we gather today.

Like them, we encounter the living God in the Body of Christ. Up close and personal, exposed to God's glory we realize our brokenness, and the brokenness of the world around us. Perhaps that brokenness feels just as overwhelming as it did for Peter and we feel the urge to fall on our knees. Yet we do not despair. God lifts us up in spite of our brokenness and calls us to join him. He tells us that who we are today is enough for us to be with him in his kingdom.

At the end of Luke's story today, Peter and James and John leave on a journey with Jesus, going into the world to be a part of his mission to fulfill God's purpose for the world. It is a journey that we are asked to undertake at the end of every time of worship together. It is always a choice for us. Some journey with Jesus into his kingdom, revealing that kingdom, proclaiming the good news of that kingdom. Others journey, instead, back into the world, leaving Jesus behind them in the church building.

Peter knew the reality of scarcity and human limitation. We have fished all night, he said, and caught nothing. We, too, are very well aware of the scarcity around us, of the limitations of human ability. We see it not only in the bareness of

grocery store shelves and in the increasing number of hands reaching for take-out meals at homeless shelters, but also in the empty pews around us and the shrinking number on our “total income” budget line. We know the human limitations of age and not enough helping hands. Yet, when presented with the new depths of possibility found in God’s kingdom, Peter said, “yes, I will do what you say” and cast his nets once more. Peter hesitates but then trusts. And his trust is rewarded.

“Throughout history the church has continued to exist and carry on its ministry in spite of the [often shaky, hesitant] responses of its members. The ancient image of the church as a fisherman’s boat tossed about on the sea, but sustained by the presence of the living Lord, is appropriate in every age” (Arland J. Hultgren, workingpreacher.org). It perhaps feels more appropriate now than ever before as people sometimes describe the Church as a sinking ship.

Also more appropriate than ever, though, is Peter’s response because his response is the response of the church. Jesus came to reveal God and to redeem all of creation but he is known to us through the witness of his first disciples like Peter. In turn, the world will know him through us, also his disciples. Peter hesitates, then trusts, and that trust is rewarded. As the church that grew from that choice to trust, we acknowledge that there is indeed scarcity and human limitation around us and even within us. But we are being offered the depths of possibility and provision of God’s abundance.

When the distraught plea for help from another church is met with willing hands before the ask is even finished and the result is the abundant provision of food for those in need, that is the power of the Holy Spirit working in us and through us to reveal God’s kingdom. That is Jesus saying to us that, right now, we are enough to be with him in God’s kingdom, participating with him in the reconciliation of all things.

We can choose to journey into the world with Jesus and cast our nets into deep waters.