

Sermon: Let Down
Text: Luke 5:1-11
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Context: WWPC
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Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.

Luke 5:4

Have you ever hatched a plan that so excited you that you couldn't sleep? A plan that got you out of bed in the morning and gave you a sense of purpose? A plan in which you were ready to invest your best energy.

A plan in which you did invest your best energy, until, only a few weeks into this new venture, you realized that you were in way over your head. When you discovered that either your energy is more limited than you had imagined, or the task required far more of it than you expected.

Either way you're forced to concede that there was simply no way that, working by yourself, you could realize whatever vision you may have had.

If you've ever had an experience like that, then you may have more in common with Jesus than you might suppose.

The story I just read is the culmination of the opening phase of Jesus's public ministry.

Read in a certain way, it almost plays like a comedy. Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist. He is then promptly driven out by the Spirit into the wilderness to face down his worst temptations.

Having passed that test, he returns to his home town of Nazareth, announces his personal mission statement by reading out a bold declaration from the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue.

He then begins to do exactly what he came to do, exactly what he just announced he would do:

Bring good news to the poor; proclaim release to the captives; recovery of sight to the blind; to let the oppressed go free.

I think it's not a stretch to say that Jesus doesn't last long before he realizes he's going to need some help.

He's preaching out in the countryside and the crowds that are following him have quickly grown startlingly large. The people in the back can't hear him. He can tell just by looking that the people in the front want something from him -- a healing touch, a loving hand placed on a brow-beaten forehead, a personal word of comfort or hope.

Already he can feel the energy draining out of him at an alarming rate. He didn't imagine he would have to give so much so quickly. Now he's backed up against the shore of Lake Gennesaret. He has nowhere to go. Nowhere to hide. No way to escape.

Until he sees a boat. More than one in fact. He has no idea who the boats belong to. He's never met these men before.

But these boats and these men are his only hope at this point.

It's a crisis which sets the scene for a pivotal moment in this unfolding story: the calling of the first disciples.

To help us get more deeply into this story, to help us hear how it might pertain to us, two thousand years later -- I'm going to invite you to do what we sometimes do:

To relax; close your eyes, if you like, and come with me on a journey back in time.

* * *

Looking back from where you sit now, back over the full sweep of everything that happened, everywhere you went, everything you did, you realize it makes sense now.

But at the time, all you remember feeling was surprise. And disbelief. Why would this teacher, a complete stranger to you, call you to be one of his disciples?

And why would you say yes? Why would you leave your boat and your nets behind and follow him?

He's mounting a love-based insurgency that will up end the status quo and challenge the powers that be, but you don't know that at the time.

Before that fateful morning, you'd never met this man. Maybe more to the point, you were, at the time, a simple fisherman. Not that there was anything wrong with that.

In fact, you loved your work. It's not like you were looking for something else to do with your life. Fishing was all you had ever known. You first went out on the lake with your father when you were just five years old. And you never stopped going out.

You loved everything about that first trip, and you never stopped loving it, to that very day.

You loved the smell of the lake, how it smelled ancient but also, somehow, tangy and fresh. You loved the way the wind puffed out the small sail on your little dingy, and how the boat instantly responded to it. You loved the way the bow split the water in front of you, and the feel of the water sliding under your keel. And the quiet, silky sound of it.

You loved how in shallower water you could look down through the clear lake, and see the bottom. You remember how it felt like you were flying, like you were on a magic carpet, sailing along three leagues above the ground.

You loved the wild thrashing of the fish when the nets were full, and the scream of the gulls overhead. You even loved it when the weather came up and the waves got big and wild. All of it together made you feel alive in a way that you believed nothing else could.

Until you realized you were wrong about that.

On that particular morning, you remember how there was a slight chill in the air. How it felt even colder than it was because your clothes were wet, not just from hauling in soaking nets but, even more, from your own sweat.

You had just come ashore after a fruitless night. You had worked for twelve straight hours, casting nets and hauling nets, casting nets and hauling nets, and had literally nothing to show for your effort except your sweat-stained tunic.

“Hey, what’s that guy doing over there?” you hear James say. “And why are there so many people around him?”

“I have no idea,” you reply.

The man spots you, then approaches. Without asking, he gets into your boat.

You’re startled but you’re more curious than angry. Who has the chutzpah to do such a thing, you wonder.

Still, you’re about to invite this stranger, in no uncertain terms, to get out of your boat. But he preempts you.

“Is this your boat?” he asks

“Yes,” you reply, unsure of where this is going.

“Can you take me out a little way off shore?”

The request startles you. Again you wonder, who is this guy? Who does he think he is? But just to satisfy your own curiosity, you comply.

You take a few strokes of the oars, just to get beyond easy reach of the crowd. The man then takes a seat, and appears to take up where he left off a few minutes ago, addressing the crowd that has assembled on the shore.

You’re not especially devout but like everyone in your village, you go to synagogue on the Sabbath. And you’ve heard a lot of rabbis over the years.

But you've never heard anything or anyone like this guy, not in your whole life. He spins stories about flowers and birds, and somehow makes the God of the universe -- a God who always seemed far off and slightly terrifying to you -- seem as close as your breath, as loving as your mother.

Suddenly he appears to be finished speaking to the crowd because he turns and speaks to you. Only you.

"Now, Simon is it?"

"Yes, how did you know that?"

He ignores your question. "Simon, put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."

"Why would I do that?" you protest. "We've worked all night. The fish are nowhere to be found." You don't mention that you you're tired and hungry, a little wet and more than a little cold.

He gives you a look. It's compassionate and understanding, on the one hand. But there's something about the way he says it, something about who is saying it, that makes it clear that this is not a request.

"Okay, if you say so." You hoist the little sail, move your boat into deeper water. It's now bright daylight. The worst possible time to do what you're about to do. You let down your nets.

Within moments the nets are so full they nearly tear. They're not made to hold this many fish. For that matter, your boat is not made to hold this many fish.

It's literally starting to sink.

"Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" you cry. You never feel panick on the water, but that is what you're feeling now.

"Fear not, Simon," he declares. And somehow the words calm you enough to hear what he says next.

"From now on you will be catching people."

At the time you thought it was an odd thing to say, likening people to fish. But now, looking back, you realize what it meant. It wasn't about the people. It was about you.

He didn't call you to join in his work in spite of being a fisherman. He called you because of it.

He called you because of the skills you had acquired over a lifetime of putting out into the deep water, day in and day out.

Because of the patience your work required. And the endurance. And because of your love for it.

He called you because he needed help distributing fish and bread to hungry people.

He called you because he needed someone in his crew who would be willing to jump out of the boat into teeth of the storm even if you ended up sinking, because it meant you were willing to step out in faith and risk whatever it took to answer his call.

Mostly he called you because he recognized that your deep joy in what you do, matched perfectly with the world's deep need.

And so you left your boat and your net and you followed him and nothing has ever made you feel more alive.