

Meeting Jesus

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany (BCP, Year C)

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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. Luke 5:1-11

I have been asked to talk to you about the day that I met Jesus. Or more precisely, to verify and to reflect on the story that that we just heard and in which I am named. I was still Simon then. You now know me as Peter.

That day with the boats and all those fish was the day I first met Jesus, but I had been hearing about him for months. He had been all over Galilee on what they were calling a 'teaching and healing mission.' Some of the stories that I'd heard seemed far-fetched, and why would I go to such a mission anyway? I was a fisherman – a practical person. No one who knew me then would have said I was *religious*. But don't get me wrong: if you spend your life on a boat, you do on occasion need divine help. Religious or not, you pray, every day, for safety, and for enough fish to feed your family.

On the day in question, there were *not* enough fish to feed my family. The lake was dead calm, and we had all come ashore to mend our nets. Before I knew it, a huge crowd had assembled on the beach nearby. You could see the energy even from a distance; you'd think they had found the messiah or something.

And then Jesus was walking our way, and – as you already heard – he stepped right into my boat. In case you don't get the poignancy of that moment, let me tell you that no one had ever before stepped into my boat without asking. That boat was my life. My very earliest memories, and my brother's earliest memories, and our father's earliest memories had been on that boat. It was our prized possession, not because it was big or beautiful, but because our lives depended on it, and our lives were all about fishing: the moon cycles, reading the currents, and sharing information with others between the boats when there was a good run so that everyone had a chance at it.

Jesus stepped right into my boat. Without asking. This was already a day like no other.

Maybe some of you have meeting Jesus stories like mine. With some of us, he seems to just show up and make himself at home, without asking.

Standing there in my boat, Jesus said, *Please get in, and row out just far enough so everyone in the crowd can see and hear me.* What was I supposed to do? I rowed out. And I listened.

His teachings were good enough, I suppose, though I don't remember any in particular, and you'll notice that whoever wrote the version of the story that we heard today apparently had no record either.

I more or less felt like an accessory to the scene, and maybe Jesus sensed that I wasn't 'getting the message.' Maybe that's when he decided to ask us to let down our nets into the deep water.

Before that day, I could not have spotted a metaphor to save my life. I didn't know the word — *metaphor*. But that whole putting the nets down into the deep thing and the resulting huge catch of fish? Definitely metaphors. Jesus found a way I could understand to say, "*You have got to go deeper — a lot deeper — to find, well, to find what you never, ever could have imagined was there.*" Or maybe he was saying, "*Take note. I intend to cast a divine net down, down, down into the deepest recesses of your heart, to bring forth, for your ultimate joy and fulfillment, what you don't even know or believe is there.*" That's a thing with metaphors. You can kind of play with various meanings. It can be kind of like playing hide and seek with God, or maybe seek and find with parts of yourself that are miraculous but have been in hiding.

As you heard, I kind of freaked out when all those fish came up. That crowd, still there on the beach — everyone saw me. But ... whatever. Down the road, after we had been with Jesus and followed him for a year or two, I was part of another scene. He asked us "*Who do you say that I am?*" I blurted out, "*You are the Messiah of God!*" (Luke 9:30) It took all that time for the recognition to gestate, but I know that the seed was planted the day I met him, in that moment when all those fish came up in the net.

That was also the moment that I knew my old life was over. The story as you already heard it explains that we immediately followed him. But don't miss what comes before the following: "... *they left everything ...*"

I left my boat, and that familiar shore and predictable routines. I left behind the only version of me that I and others had known. Since then I've known many who left things behind that they once clung to as sacred. Some left behind jobs, relationships or habits that had defined them. Some left behind their lifelong emotional survival gear. Following Jesus definitely was — is — exhilarating. But don't underestimate the cost if you want to be more than a spectator.

I suppose I was asked to talk about that day that I met Jesus partly in hopes that there might be some lessons for others. I'm torn about what those lessons might be. Part of me wants to tell you: If you see Jesus coming toward your boat one day, run for your life. Deny that it's your boat. Tell him it has a leak and needs a repair. Or just straight out say to him, "*You go find someone else to change forever.*"

On the other hand, if you're like me, and if Jesus gets anywhere near your boat, you may feel that you have no choice in the matter. Right away, or in time, you may get to a place of no return. Along the way you will meet others who also have their own unique meeting-Jesus stories. They, like you, know what it's like when Jesus casts a net down, down, down into the deepest recesses of your heart, and what it's like to join the school, the countless multitude, of those who caught up in the vast net of his grace. *Amen.*