

Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church

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INTO THE DEEP WATER

Luke 5: 1-11

Matthew and Mark both narrate the calling of the fishermen by the Sea of Galilee. But neither explain why these laborers left their boats and nets to follow Jesus. Luke gives us an explanation in one of his most charming stories. I invite you to imagine that you were there.

Jesus takes a morning walk along the lakeshore and his winsome words attract a large crowd. Here there is no rejection, as in that not so successful sermon in his hometown. Here people hang on to his every word and press in upon him. So many people that Jesus asks the owner of a little fishing boat for assistance. Could he use his boat as a floating pulpit? And thus Peter, that strong-willed fisherman, gets caught up in the story of Jesus.

From his perch in this borrowed boat Jesus speaks to those on the shore and those wadding out into the water. Peter no doubt heard every word. When the sermon is finished, one would expect Jesus to be ferried back to land. But that is not what happens. Jesus

then turns to Peter and asks him to do one more favor. “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”

Now Peter and his partners James and John had been up all night and caught nothing. They were, in fact, in the process of washing their nets and hanging them up to dry. It had been a long, frustrating night and they were exhausted. Yet Peter senses something magisterial about Jesus, someone worth listening to. Already Peter had seen the power of Jesus’ words on the crowd. Now he feels that power himself. And so he says to this maritime preacher, “If you say so, I will let down the nets.”

At this point the preacher who offers moving words becomes the miracle worker who commands the waters. The fish come out of nowhere and are now everywhere. The text describes a “great shoal of fish” so huge they are about to break the nets. Peter calls for backup from his partners James and John who then launch their boat to haul in this immense catch of fish. Imagine the splashing, the shouts of astonishment, laughter and celebration -a fisherman’s dream come true! But there are so many fish that the two boats almost sink. This success is almost too good to be true or even safe!

At this point many would see only dollar signs. Fish were their livelihood and doubtless they had never seen such a windfall.

Perhaps you could imagine them saying, “Jesus, would you mind going fishing with us every day?” But here the nobility of Peter is revealed. With fish flopping and the boats almost sinking, Peter falls at the knees of Jesus and cries out, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” Peter realizes that this is not just good fortune. This is a manifestation of God’s power and majesty.

Peter knows he is in the presence of the holy. Much like Isaiah who sees the Lord high and lifted up in the temple and cries out, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips.” In the presence of the holy we are all undone.

It is here that Jesus lifts up Peter with these stunning words, “Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching humans.” Now it should be noted that the phrase Jesus uses can be translated literally, “You will take alive many humans.” The phrase “take alive” translates a Greek word from which we get the English word “zoology”. Thus, Luke avoids the unpalatable notion of catching and gutting humans! No, that is not what Jesus meant. Bringing in people alive would be a better translation. Catching folks up in the net of God’s love could be another. Peter, James and John will now bring along others into the service of the Kingdom of God.

What is delightful about Luke's story is this: Peter, James and John are invited to leave the shallows and head out into the deep waters. There where that "great shoal of fish" will be found. Even in the daytime, when fishing was not so good as at night. There in the deep waters there is life, unexpected life, abundant life-flopping and splashing and almost inundating their boats.

Now sisters and brothers, if there is one thing the Christian life teaches us, it is this: no risk, no reward. The play it safe, hug the shoreline kind of faith seldom surprises. The predictable life brings predictable results. I wonder how many of us just hug the shoreline. Do we subscribe to this motto: "Hey, let's wade in the shallow end." Maybe that is why our Christian life is so incredibly boring sometimes. We expect little, we risk little, and we gain little. We get back exactly what we put into it. The shallows.

In the fall of 2009 the Synod of the Southwest sponsored a mission trip to meet the Christian community in China. We encountered the church in China, an amazing body of Christians who have literally come back from the dead. Or a death that the government planned for all religious groups during Mao's dreaded Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. Thousands of Christians

were jailed and sent to collective farms throughout the country. Churches were shuttered and her leaders dispersed.

After Mao died, the Chinese Communist Party allowed some Christian groups to be reconstituted but under strict limitations. It is not religious freedom but a form of regulated religion. Yet something amazing happened. Out from the underground, Chinese Christians began reopening churches. And then the adage came true, “If you build it, they will come.” And they came in the thousands.

We went to many services and were thrilled to see packed churches. Vibrant, alive, filled with the Spirit of God. And we saw something I had never seen before—a bicycle traffic jam both before and after the services. Between those multiple services held to accommodate the crowds, I saw pastors directing bicycle traffic. It left you breathless.

We had lunch with a pastor who had spent thirteen years in prison during the Cultural Revolution. After suffering so much for his faith, he beamed with joy as he gave thanks for the new life in the Chinese church, even with the restrictions. That man was sent into the deep waters. But then he witnessed a “great shoal of fish” being gathered into the net of God’s love. Teeming life, abundant life, new life in Christ—all over China.

I heard that Chinese pastor witness to this amazing truth: God provides even in an oppressive environment, with state sponsored threats. Listening to that pastor I asked myself, “Could I be that brave? Would I put my life on the line when Mao’s Red Guard threatened prison and death?” Talking with that remarkable servant of God, then in his 80’s, I promised myself that I would not be afraid were governmental pressure levied against me. I vowed not to hug the shoreline or just wade in the shallow end. By the grace of God, I vowed to venture out into the deep waters to see the wonders of God’s love, the marvels of God’s power.

Have I kept that vow I made in the fall of 2009? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. And that’s the way it goes in the Christian journey. Sometimes we bow before Jesus knowing we are in the presence of the holy. And sometimes we ignore him and his demands upon our lives. So my prayer for us this day is the following: “O God, keep me from fear that makes me hug the shoreline. Give me a strong heart to venture with you into the deep waters. And may your grace lead me always with your strong hand. Thanks be to God. Amen.”