

### “Fish for People”

I'm not much of a fisherman. I have enjoyed going fishing, but it's been a while. I know that there are places near enough to us in Tucson that I could go fishing, but it's not really a high priority for me. I used to live in Minnesota, which is called “The Land of Ten Thousand Lakes.” I've been on some of those lakes trying to fish, even when everyone else reported that they were catching fish in droves, and I caught absolutely nothing.

That really sums up my general experience with fishing. That was not the case, however, for Peter, James and John. These men were fishermen. They spent a good deal of time on the Sea of Galilee fishing to make a living to support themselves and their families.

But even accomplished fishermen sometimes have bad days or bad nights. Sometimes these fishermen came up empty, even after working hard and putting all of their knowledge and experience to use. In our sermon text today, we find Jesus approaching these three during the day after a long night of unsuccessful fishing. They learned some important lessons that day, lessons that we will also want to apply to our own lives. That day Jesus called them to fish for people.

That day, Jesus had a large crowd gathered around him as he taught near the Sea of Galilee, which Luke refers to as the Lake of Gennesaret. In fact, the crowd packed so tightly around him that Jesus decided on an unconventional approach. He climbed into the boat that belonged to Simon Peter and had him take the boat just offshore. From that spot in the water, Jesus could be seen and heard more easily as he preached to those assembled on shore.

Luke doesn't record for us any of the words that Jesus preached, but he does share with us the amazing event that took place once Jesus was finished speaking. At that time, he told Simon, **“Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.”** Now, remember that Simon had a great deal of knowledge and experience on that particular body of water. He knew that the best time to find fish was not during the middle of the day, but rather at night. That's why he had spent the previous night trying to catch fish. He also knew that the best place to catch fish was not in the deep parts of the middle of the lake, but in shallower areas, where he and his partners had been struggling all night.

But Simon was inclined to follow what Jesus said. Why? He would follow Jesus because he had been listening to Jesus. He had heard the authority behind his words. Simon knew that Jesus was someone special. In fact, he had become a follower of Jesus. No, he hadn't left his work completely in order to follow Jesus all the time, not yet at least, but he had taken a special interest in learning more from him. And so, against all of his reason and understanding, he simply took Jesus at his word. **Simon answered, “Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.”**

What an example Simon Peter offers to us! On one side was a lifetime of experience as a fisherman, and on the other side was the command of Jesus. And Simon took Jesus at his word. How difficult it is for us to do the same! The word of Jesus is so simple and so clear to us about a great many things, and yet we so often allow that simple word to be pushed aside in favor of our own thoughts, feelings, or experience. Such thinking is certainly prevalent in the church at large or in society as well. For example, what God says about marriage and human sexuality has been largely set aside for whatever people feel like or whatever their experience suggests. People feel compelled to listen to so-called scientific experts when what they say very clearly runs against what God has revealed. And this sort of error has been so far-reaching that many question even possibility of God performing a miracle or doing anything that would go against our normal human experience.

But this isn't just a problem “out there,” in the world around us. It is a problem in our own hearts as well. When what God tells us mitigates against what we want or what we feel, our faith is often weak. We settle for worldly wisdom instead of seeking God's will. We avoid ridicule and persecution by listening to peers and public figures instead of listening to the plain words of Scripture. And instead of setting

aside our work to spend time listening to Jesus, we all too often ignore him and focus on material goals and goods.

Peter, at least in this case, did not. He listened. He and his partners went out into the deep water and cast their nets. **When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.**

Jesus showed once again that listening to him was the right thing to do. Jesus gave these men a miraculous catch of fish. It overwhelmed two boats and their nets to the point that they were on the verge of sinking. Everyone who witnessed it was amazed and astonished. But Peter's reaction took it even a step further. **When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"** Jesus had just shown Peter the glorious reality of who he was, and it made such a sharp contrast to who Peter was. Peter was a sinner who deserved no good thing, who deserved no compassion from a perfect Jesus, who deserved no company with him.

As we have seen Jesus reveal his glory throughout the Epiphany season, shouldn't this have been our reaction as well? Doesn't the glory of God himself shine on our lives in such a way as to reveal their sinful and dark nature? Shouldn't all of Jesus' miracles and his teachings force us to our knees in humble repentance?

It should. And when it does, Jesus is there to reassure us. He came to forgive our sins. He came to destroy our doubts. He came to replace our sinful mistrust with his perfect faith. He came to replace our lives of sin with his perfect life of love.

And he calls sinful, yet forgiven followers to proclaim his forgiveness to others. Our text tells us: **Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men." So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.** Peter, James, and John would still fish, but they would fish for people. They would cast out the net of God's precious gospel message, the news that in Jesus Christ there is forgiveness for all sinners. And they would haul in a catch of human souls and lives set apart for God and pulled out of a world of sin and death.

God called these men to a unique ministry. They would be trained by him directly and sent out by him in person. They would be eyewitnesses of his work, to the point of seeing him alive again after his death on the cross. They were leaving everything behind to follow him in this special way.

That's not necessarily what he expects of everyone here today. But he does have expectations of us that are highlighted by this text. God calls us to fish for people, too. He calls us to share what we have been given. He calls us to look on those who do not yet know their Savior with pity and compassion just like his and to tell them what he has done for them. He calls on us to generously support the work of sharing the gospel here and far away through our offerings and gifts.

And to some he has given the gifts necessary to serve him by sharing that gospel on a full-time basis, as a called worker in his Church. Many in our congregation have watched with interest as we work through the process of calling a pastor to serve this congregation and to reach out in Sahuarita and Green Valley. But have we given much thought to the pastors that we call? They stepped out in faith to study and pursue this ministry not because of the job security or the competitive wages. They did so because they heard Jesus' call to fish for people. Perhaps you know someone, or perhaps you are someone who might consider fishing for people as a career, as a full-time ministry. Peter, James, and John stepped away from a fishing business in order to fish for people. It was a fruit of faith. It was a move that trusted in the power and love that Jesus so clearly displayed.

Jesus has displayed that same power and love before our eyes once again today, just as he has throughout the Epiphany season, and really throughout his holy Scriptures. Respond with a heart of faith. Maybe it will be to consider the full-time work of a pastor or a Christian teacher. Maybe it will be to renew your support for those who are involved in such work directly. Maybe it will be to take the chance, to listen to Jesus, and to cast out the gospel net to someone you know who needs it. You have seen Jesus' power to bring in a catch of fish. Now go, and fish for people.

The Text: Luke 5:1–11 (NIV84)

One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the people crowding around him and listening to the word of God, <sup>2</sup> he saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. <sup>3</sup> He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

<sup>4</sup> When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch."

<sup>5</sup> Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

<sup>6</sup> When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. <sup>7</sup> So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

<sup>8</sup> When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"

<sup>9</sup> For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, <sup>10</sup> and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.

Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men." <sup>11</sup> So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.