

Luke 5:1-11

Abundant Risk

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This winter and spring, all the way through Easter, we will make our way through the Gospel of Luke, which we began in Advent with the stories surrounding Jesus' birth. Last week, following a detour into Matthew for Epiphany, we returned to Luke and the story of 12-year-old Jesus in the temple at the end of chapter 2. That's the only story of Jesus as an adolescent in the biblical text, so the author of Luke fast-forwards his narrative to Jesus as an adult, preparing for his public life. In chapters 3 and 4, he was baptized by John the Baptist, filled with the Holy Spirit, tested in the wilderness, and then he began his to teach in Galilee.

He taught in the synagogues around Galilee and the people he encountered liked what they heard. Luke didn't include, in his narrative, the details of what Jesus was teaching, but we can guess that it was good news for the people who began to follow him from place to place. When he reached his hometown of Nazareth, he taught in the synagogue there as well. Unfortunately, his message was not as well received, so he left and went to Capernaum where he cast a demon from a man and healed a fisherman named Simon's mother-in-law.

The people wanted him to stay there, but Jesus said to them, "I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose." With that, he continued to draw crowds as he taught in the synagogues of Judea.

This brings us to today's text, Luke 5:1-11:

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God,² he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets.³ 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.⁴ When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."⁵ Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."⁶ When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break.⁷ 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.⁸ But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"⁹ For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken;¹⁰ 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."¹¹ When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

The Sea of Galilee, called the lake of Gennesaret in this story, is a body of fresh water in Israel 13 miles long and seven miles wide. Since biblical times, the sea has been a source of protein for the surrounding land and beyond. In Jesus' day, fish was the primary source of protein. The fishing industry did well in the time of Jesus because the Rome-appointed governors invested their own money in the industry and therefore provided a stable political environment for it to grow. According to the ancient Jewish historian Josephus, there were more than 230 fishing boats working the sea during the time of Jesus' ministry.

<https://www.loyolapress.com/catholic-resources/prayer/arts-and-faith/culinary-arts/biblical-fishing-101-reeling-in-the-first-fishers-of-faith/?fbclid=IwAR3BMOOQac9fuxMBycOv07HwzP9j7eVCQAhWhofV7jqB604wQE4rThA7bs>

That is the backdrop for this story that is both a miracle story and a call story. Let's begin by talking about miracles. To experienced fishermen, who had fished all night long and caught nothing, those nets, so quickly overflowing with fish, were miraculous. Suddenly, there was abundance where there had been only scarcity. There were fish, a lot of fish, not only to feed their families that day, but to sell to other people to feed their families, which would leave the fishermen with money to for their families beyond that day.

Fishing could be quite profitable, but it was hard work and required more than a guy with a net and a boat. In deep water fishing, two or three boats would work together to set up a net between them and chase fish into the net. This hard, heavy process would be repeated over and over all night long and by morning the fishermen could potentially bring in up to a half ton of fish. So, those nets thrown out once, returning overflowing with fish were, indeed, a miracle.

In the gospels, miracle stories are about more than astonishing events: in this case, about more than a lot of fish. The gospel authors used miraculous stories to teach their audiences something about God. This story shows us that God is a God of abundance. There are so many fish in those nets, not one but two boats were in danger of sinking with their weight. God is an over-the-top kind of giver, giving so much that the only explanation for that kind of abundance was divine intervention.

This miracle story also teaches something about Jesus' mission. It shows us that Jesus' message isn't only for some people, it is for all people, especially the ones who have been at the bottom of the social hierarchy, left on the outside. In the gospel narratives, miracles aren't doled out because of who the receiver is, but because of who God is. Jesus' message of compassion, justice, and provision is for even these fishermen, even the one whose sin made him afraid to be in the presence of holiness, "Go away from me, Lord," Simon Peter said, "for I am a sinful man." Peter's "sinfulness" probably had to do with living far from the temple and not making the trip to the temple for high Holy days and sacrifice, according to Jewish law. Despite his disconnection from that part of his faith tradition, though, he recognized the presence of God at work, experiencing his very own epiphany moment. However, even sitting there surrounded by unimaginable abundance, he wasn't sure it was for him. But it was.

Before his nets were overflowing with fish, Simon Peter was willing to take a chance on Jesus, even though what he was being invited to do didn't make sense. I mean, they had just finished cleaning their nets, the hard work was done, and this guy from Nazareth comes along and says, "Hey, I know how to use a hammer, let me tell you how to fish." Simon Peter could have said, "I'm not throwing my net out in deep water or any water. I'm done. I'm tired. I'm the fisherman here, not you, Jesus. I'm going home." Instead, he said, "Alright, whatever you say." (that's my very loose translation)

Simon Peter and Jesus were not complete strangers in Luke's story. Recall, I mentioned that in chapter 4, Luke tells a story about Jesus at Simon Peter's house where he healed his mother-in-law. Maybe this experienced fisherman figured if Jesus could heal his mother-in-law, he should at least give him the benefit of the doubt when it came to fishing. Maybe he could risk being open to the possibility

that something unexpected could happen. And so, Simon Peter did what Jesus said. And something unexpected did happen...a miracle.

And the miracle led to a call.

Faced with undeniable abundance, more than they ever imagined, Simon Peter and the other two fishermen left it all to follow Jesus, “Do not be afraid:”, Jesus said, ‘from now on you will be catching people.’ When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.” This comparison is a little over the top, but this feels to me a bit like someone winning the lottery and choosing to walk away from the check. Who does that? Think about it, when things are going well, people don’t usually walk away from it. Right?

How many of you buy lottery tickets? John and I don’t make a habit of buying them. But when a jackpot is really big, like this past week, we will occasionally buy a ticket or two. I know...we act as if 5 million dollars isn’t worth our time, but 50 million is. Anyway, whenever we do buy a ticket, we can’t resist having the conversation about what we will do with the money *when* we win. And because I over-think everything, I always imagine that the money we win ends up ruining our lives. John and I fight over the money, our kids end up mad at each other and our friends no longer want anything to do with us because our life is fabulous, and they are jealous. Whatever. Anyway, all of this over-thinking reinforces what I already know about myself. The life partner, the kids, the friends...all are more important to me than money. Which leads me finally to the answer to, “Who walks away from the lottery check (or from things going well)?” I think people walk away from good things and comfort when they are walking toward something else, something better.

So, what is the something better that these fishermen were being called to? What does it mean to “catch people,” or to be fishers of people? I’ve heard other preachers preach on this text and the general idea has always been that Jesus was inviting these men into evangelism in the same way churches today invite their members to hand out Bible tracts or bring a friend to retreats designed for seekers. “Come along with me, friends, and let’s get these souls saved.”

But, what if that wasn’t what Jesus meant? What if he was inviting the fishermen to something a little edgier, a little riskier, something that would change everything? What if he was asking them to participate in the work of upsetting

the political status quo, turning things upside-down? In his book, *Binding the Strongman: A Political Reading of Mark*, theologian, Ched Myers, wrote this about Jesus calling the disciples:

“There is perhaps no expression more traditionally misunderstood than Jesus’ invitation to these workers to become ‘fishers of men.’ This metaphor, despite the grand old tradition of missionary interpretation, does not refer to the ‘saving of souls,’ as if Jesus were conferring upon these men instant evangelist status. Rather, the image is carefully chosen from Jeremiah 16:16, where it is used as a symbol of (God’s) Yahweh’s censure of Israel. Elsewhere the ‘hooking of fish’ is a euphemism for judgment upon the rich (Amos 4:2) and powerful (Ezekiel 29:4). Taking this mandate for his own, Jesus is inviting common folk to join him in his struggle to overturn the existing order of power and privilege.” (*Binding the Strong Man*, p. 132)

That is the invitation extended to each one of us. We are invited to follow Jesus, not to coerce people into believing what we believe about God or Jesus, or to get them to say the “right words” or the right prayer, but to work for a world in which the ones who have been at the bottom and kept on the outside finally have justice and finally have a place to belong.

Trying to get inside Simon Peter’s head a little bit...

He saw his mother-in-law get up from her sick bed fever free. Not only had she been healed, but she began to bustle around the house serving others. He knew about Jesus teaching in the synagogues and saw the crowd of people on the shore, hanging on his every word. And then there were the nets filled with fish. I wonder if he thought if Jesus could do all of that, maybe he could really change things. It was risky, but Simon Peter and the others were there for it.

Whenever I read one of the call stories in the Bible, I am reminded of a favorite quote by writer, minister, and theologian Frederick Buechner. I am certain I have shared it with you before, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” I believe this to be true and, based on my lived experience, sometimes we have to respond to God’s call before we discover what our “deep gladness” even is and sometimes the place we find our “deep gladness” is a complete surprise.

And I believe one of the primary jobs of the church is to equip and encourage people to respond to God's call. Put another way...we have to help each other find purpose. Unfortunately, I'm not sure churches, in general, have done a great job with that. We talk a lot about spiritual gifts and discerning what our spiritual gifts are. There are even spiritual gift inventories that take hours to complete and cause us to focus too much on the things we are comfortable doing. It has always felt to me like we have encouraged one another to do the easy, familiar thing, rather than encouraging each other to walk away from our nets and follow Jesus into something new.

Simon Peter (and the others) left everything and followed Jesus. He didn't ask for clarification about what it meant to fish for people. He didn't ask what his role would be in the community. He didn't ask where they were going or who they would be going with. He didn't tell Jesus he would follow, but only if he didn't have to sit by John and if he promised they never had to go to Samaria. He looked at his life, that in that moment was actually going fairly well, and said, "There has to be more than this. I'm in." And he followed.

There has to be more even than this. This week has been, for some of us, an exciting week. We have inaugurated a new president and the first Black, female vice president in our nation's history was sworn in. And even if you don't like the politics of the new administration, I hope you can understand that there are many women, many people of color, who are celebrating that finally they feel represented at the highest level of our government. As wonderful as that is, there has to be more. The Vice President is just one person, in one role. Racism and misogyny are still things...big things in this country. And those are not the only big things. There are still immigrant children separated from their parents. There are still millions without access to affordable healthcare, without jobs, and then there is COVID.

There has to be more than this.

Even right here...There has to be more than this because this week in Bartlesville a woman who was homeless was found dead in a shed on a vacant lot and we were outraged, as if we didn't know homelessness is a problem in our community. "We have to do better," we said. Yeah, we do. Doing better means actually doing something. This week in Bartlesville a woman who has lived here her whole life is still sleeping outside because in her words, "she can't go back to the shelter."

Friends, we don't have time to fill out spiritual gift inventories. They wouldn't help anyway. I am suggesting that we follow the ways of Jesus into the places we are uncomfortable. I am not suggesting we all switch careers, but I am suggesting that we follow the risky ways of Jesus regardless of what we do for a living. I'm saying that it is time to focus more on making a life than making a living...it's time to walk toward the something better.

This brings me back to Buechner's quote, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." God is calling me to really work on the challenges of homelessness and affordable temporary housing in our community. It's been on my mind and on heart for a long time, but I haven't been able to fit another thing in, which no longer feels like a good reason. I've talked to other community leaders and the time to do something different is now. There is too much suffering. We must search for creative solutions, knowing that one solution is not enough. One shelter that does things one way is not enough. Even Family Promise is not enough. I hope you will consider learning, dreaming, and working together as we address this deep hunger in our community. I know from experience that is where I will find my personal deep gladness. Maybe you will too.

We are all called, dear ones. We all have purpose. Let's encourage one another as we find it together. Amen.