

Fishers of Men
By Jason Huff
Psalm 100, Acts 4:1-14, Luke 5:1-11

Our third reading this morning comes from Luke 5:11. As you might remember, last week we heard about Jesus' ministry in Capernaum to the sick and oppressed. Today, Luke tells us how Jesus called his first disciples just south of that city. Here's what Luke writes. "One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the people crowding around him and listening to the word of God, he saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. 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. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." 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." 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. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, 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." So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him."

When I think about fishing, I think about my grandfathers. They were very different from each other...one was outgoing and friendly, the other quiet and reserved. One was my good friend; the other, I saw seldom, and it was hard for me to get to know him. But one way I related to both of them was fishing. Both of them could sit for hours out by a lake, just waiting to see if something would bite. As a child, I really didn't understand it. I loved the idea of catching my own fish, of being able to get "the big one" and reeling it in and maybe even having it for dinner that night. But the waiting...for a seven year old boy, the waiting was just too much. I wanted to run and play and do something, anything, but just sit and do nothing in the hopes that I might get lucky. But then again, I was too young to really see the real point of that kind of fishing...which it turns out is not fishing at all, but relationships. We're going to watch a quick clip that might make it a little more real to us. [clip from **Disturbia**] Maybe that right there is the reason that fishing still captures our imagination. It's the thought that it's more than just a way to waste some time, but a way that we might grow closer to someone else.

Now the kind of fishing we read about in Luke was a different kind of fishing, obviously. It's professional fishing, the kind where Simon and his friends made their living. It's very hard work; it was back then and it still is today. Some of the methods have changed, but the difficulties are still the same. It sounds simple...you have to find the fish and they have to be caught...but hauling in a catch can be backbreaking and dangerous. In modern crab fishing, for example, a crew member may work over twenty hours a day when a prime catch is found, often in icy and hazardous conditions. And the difference between making a fortune and making less than minimum wage often had little to do with skill and perseverance and more to do with timing and providence...what some would call "luck." It's a hard life to choose, but for some like Simon and James and John, it was their calling in more ways than one.

Luke's story begins one morning when Jesus is teaching out by the seaside. By this time, He has gained some notoriety, and there's a crowd wherever He goes. While He still teaches in the synagogues, He no longer has to go there to find people interested in hearing what He has to say. In fact, the crowds are starting to get a little overwhelming at times. Everyone wants to see him; everyone wants to hear him. Jesus looks around, and He sees Simon and his friends who've just come back in from their nightly fishing expedition. He goes to Simon and asks if he can use his boat. As we learned last week, Simon knows Jesus because he healed his mother-in-law. Simon agreed, and so Jesus teaches from there...the overcrowding problem is solved.

Once He's done, Jesus sends Simon out into deep water. It seems like a perfect plan. The crowd will disperse and Jesus will get a moment's rest. But then Jesus makes an odd request of Simon. "Let down your nets for a catch," He says. Simon is bewildered a bit, because what Jesus says seems ludicrous. Here's why...fisherman in that era used an ancient version of what are called "trammel nets." Fish can see a trammel net during the daytime and can swim around it. They're useless when the sun is up. Trammel fishing is only possible from roughly dusk to dawn. Even if they could deep-sea fish at daytime, the fish move to shallower water during the day. Simon knows that Jesus' plan makes no sense. Besides, he and his fishing partners have been up all night. They're exhausted. They want to go home and get some sleep. But he also knows there is something special about Jesus. Simon's already seen Jesus' power to heal, and there's a level of trust. If Jesus says it, Simon will do it. And we all know what happens next. The boats are filled with fish, so much so that they start to sink. This isn't just one netful; it's as if the fish are almost hopping right into the boat with them! These boats were usually over twenty-five feet long, so we are talking about hundreds and hundreds of fish.

But then Simon's reaction surprises us. In the last two stories we've read from Luke, the citizens of Nazareth and Capernaum wanted Jesus to stick around for all they thought He could do for them. In Capernaum, they begged him to stay. But Simon does the opposite. Simon asks Jesus to leave him. Simon says he is a sinner. Now there's nothing in Luke that would make us think that on our own. Fishing was considered an honorable profession. None of Simon's actions that we know of make him a terrible person. But in the presence of this miracle, Simon is brought to his knees before Jesus. He is awestruck, even frightened, and would prefer to be out of his presence...not because he doesn't like Jesus, but because he realizes how lowly he is in comparison to the holy Son of God.

But Jesus comforts him. Jesus says, "Don't be afraid. From now on you will catch men." Right then and there, Jesus changes the profession of these men. They are going to work with Him, follow Him...they will become His apprentices and will learn the art of bringing people to God. And so they stand up and leave. It doesn't seem to matter that they have two boats full of fish! They've been called by Christ to come with Him, and so everything else falls by the wayside. And we know that they learn their trade well. We heard a sample passage from Acts this morning, where Peter stood and proclaimed Jesus Christ, and many believed because of his actions. He became a true fisher of men.

It might be easy to see this as just a story about an amazing miracle that led some people to follow Christ. But the call to become people fishers is for all of us. It is our responsibility as Christians to share our faith with others. Matthew 28 tells us Jesus' command to His disciples and to us. After His resurrection, Jesus said, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." In Romans 10, the apostle Paul explains for us just why it is so important for us to do this. He writes in verses 9 and 10, "If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved." Paul continues in verse 13, saying, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!""

Here's the story in a nutshell...our responsibility is to become close enough to Jesus Christ that we too can spread the good news of His salvation without fear, doubt, or shame. That's often the biggest problem...because we aren't that close to Christ in our daily lives. When the opportunity comes to share our faith, we shrink back. We hesitate. We become afraid. But when we do know Him personally, when we know Him as Savior and Lord and friend, being God's fisherman isn't so hard. So what is it that helped Simon Peter get this close to Jesus? How can we latch on to what he learned and learn it too? There are three things I see that showed Peter's ability to become a faithful disciple. First, *he took a risk and trusted God*. Second, *he realized his place before God*. And then, *he dropped everything to follow Christ*. If we put these three things into practice, we are on our way to become fishers of men, too.

First, *Simon took a risk and trusted God*. Not only did trust God, he had faith beyond his own reason. Jesus' idea of going out for a catch at that place and time was simply nuts. Simon was a smart guy. He knew that going back out would probably anger the rest of his crew. He knew that he wasn't going to get much sleep. He knew that by all reason, they were doomed to failure. But Simon put his faith in Jesus. He'd seen just a little of what Jesus could do, and that gave him faith enough to take a risk. He took a risk of looking foolish to the other fishermen. He took a risk that Jesus wouldn't be able to follow through and that he'd wind up disappointed. But Simon decided that the risk was worth it, and he wound up with a catch beyond all catches.

For us today, having that kind of faith and trust is just as risky. Unlike Simon Peter, Jesus isn't physically in the boat with us. We often forget that through the Holy Spirit, Jesus is always by our side, directing us and showing us the right path. But we have the promise of Scripture, the promise that God will never leave us or forsake us. Does that mean that having deep faith is easy? Definitely not. We know we may risk alienating our family or our friends; we may be seen as that strange person who really believes all that "stuff" about Jesus Christ. It's a difficult choice to choose to trust God.

But we know that we aren't the only ones who have taken the risk to trust God. The Bible gives us many examples of those who trusted God even to the point of death to proclaim the Gospel. In Acts 12, we found out that James, one of the fishermen in today's story who became a disciple, was one of the first Christians killed for his testimony about Christ. Although it's not recorded in the Bible, we know from various letters in the early church that Peter eventually lost his life for spreading the Gospel around 67 AD. And even now, Christians are still martyred for standing up for Christ in various places throughout the world. Yet God never left their side, not any of them. God remains true to them not only to death but also into the eternal life He promises. And God will show that trusting in Him is always worth the risk. It's the only way to become a true fisher of men.

Second, *Simon realized his place before God*. This is something that has become difficult in our modern era to understand. A few weeks ago, our Wednesday night Bible study class spent a lot of time talking about a passage where it said that we should work out our salvation with "fear and trembling." It was really easy to get tripped up on that wording. Are we supposed to really fear God, a kind of quaking in our boots horror-movie kind of fear? Or is there something else to it? What should be our attitude towards God?

Throughout the Bible, we are told that one of God's key attributes is that He is holy. Holiness at one level means being set apart, being different. God is different from us; God created us but is separate from us. The Bible teaches us that God is *not* in everything and God is *not* everything; He is unique unto Himself. But holiness at another level also means being perfect, without sin, faultless. God is holy because He always does the right thing. He is without flaw and He never errs in His judgment. So on top of everything else, on top of God being all powerful and all knowing, on top of being sovereign over all things, He is holy. Even if we have just started to comprehend his vastness and goodness and holiness, we should be filled with awe.

Fear for God, in the biblical sense, is respecting the incredible greatness and glory of God and realizing that it is so wide and long and deep as to be incomprehensible...and to realize that we are so little in comparison. King David expressed it this way in Psalm 8: "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" David realized our insignificance in comparison to God. And yet David also writes immediately following that, "You made man a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet." We are special, we are important, we have real worth and merit, not because we have any particular worth on our own apart from God, but because we are God's creation that He has uniquely made.

That fear is something we really don't understand today. We use God's name carelessly. How many of us say God's name when we really just want to express surprise? That's something that's a part of our culture, something some of us do without thinking. But even for those of us who have given it some thought, we often don't give God the honor and glory He is due. We like God as the infant in the manger; we might be able to deal with Jesus as a friend; but we have a hard time realizing that God is so much greater than us, so much more powerful, and deserving not just of praise and worship and songs but also devotion and obedience and love. Our vision of God often isn't big enough.

But Simon *does* realize who is sitting in his boat. Jesus is more than a man. Simon has heard Him preach and seen Him heal and sits there in a pile of fish so big that the boat can't hold them all. He knows that Jesus is righteous. He has extraordinary power like no one has ever seen. A doctor may cure the sick, but what man can make the fish of the sea follow Him and jump into His nets? Simon falls down before Him because there's nothing else even remotely appropriate. And when he tells Jesus to go away, it's because he realizes his unworthiness. None of his sins are beyond the pale. He's just a sinner like you and me, a person who knows that he doesn't stack up. He knows that on any given day, he flubs up in some small way what God would want for him to do. We'll find out that he's often the first disciple to jump into any situation, but that also means that he gets himself into a lot of trouble...he leaps before he looks. Most importantly, though, he knows that he isn't up to the standard that God set.

But this is precisely why Jesus can use Simon at this point. Simon has proven himself humble. His first thought isn't for himself or his needs, what he could get with a friend like Jesus by his side. He knows that a guy like Jesus might run into trouble hanging out with those of little reputation like himself. But Jesus picks him up and dusts him off and makes him a part of his team. And this is what makes us useful to God too. If we will humble ourselves and acknowledge our failings and start praying not just for what God can do for us but also about what we can do for God, we will be available to him. If we know our place before God and give Him the glory rather than ourselves, we will find that we are on the fisherman's path.

Finally, *Simon and his friends dropped everything to follow Christ*. The catch of fish that Jesus steered the fishermen to could have been worth a large sum. Yet they abandon everything. They don't put the nets away; they don't put the boats in drydock. Someone else will profit from their windfall. They don't care. When it becomes clear to them that Jesus intends for them to follow, they do it. They realize that their biggest catch is yet to come. They don't even completely know it or understand it yet, but they are going to get to know God face to face, in the person of Jesus. To get that chance is worth putting everything else aside and going on that risky journey with him.

Now this journey looks a bit different for us. When we think about fishing for people, we realize we are in a gigantic pond right here in this community! Many people do know God, but many don't. Many are searching, some who are sitting in pews and padded seats across Michigan right now, who haven't heard the real truth of God. Unlike Simon, unless God specifically calls us to ministry or to some other place, we don't have to leave our homes and families to learn what Jesus has to teach us. The church gives us the opportunity to learn. But we are called to be people fishers right here, and we are still called to abandon anything that keeps us from following Christ. We talked last week about how Christ came to free us from our sins and our addictions. Have you dropped those at the feet of Jesus yet? Simon left behind his business and his livelihood to follow. What in your life is the boat that's anchoring you rather than letting you follow Christ? Each one of us has our own tethers that keep us from being totally faithful to Christ. And Simon's example makes it clear...leave it behind.

The other thing we need to remember is that Simon left a good thing behind. There was nothing wrong with being a fisherman. It wasn't sinful. It was simply what he needed to leave. We need to be aware that things we leave behind may be good things, even helpful things. It may mean following a few less TV shows to spend more time with the family and taking time in prayer each day. It may mean driving the clunker a couple more years and giving the money away. Don't let the good things you have in your life stop you from following the best thing there is, which is life in Jesus Christ. Jesus tells a parable in Matthew 13, where he says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it." If we are to become God's fishermen, we need to be ready to set aside good things for the greatness that is His kingdom. Michael Card, a Christian musician, wrote a song about this passage that talks about it like this. "There sits Simon, so foolishly wise...proudly he's tending his nets...Then Jesus calls, and the boats drift away, and all that he owns he forgets...more than the nets he abandoned that day, he found that his pride was soon drifting away...it's hard to imagine the freedom we find from the things we leave behind." If we trust in God and realize our place before Him, then this becomes so much easier because we will have already taken the first steps in this journey. God is faithful to lead us, and if we are willing, we *will* find freedom from the things we leave behind.

As we started today, we saw a clip of a father and son growing closer through a fishing trip. God wants to bring His children closer to Himself, and many times He does it through other people, through people in our lives that need to know of His love and mercy and forgiveness. God made Simon Peter into a fisher of men, and He wants the same for you and me. God wants to give us the power to proclaim Him faithfully to this generation, and He wants us to grow closer to Him in the process. Are you willing to trust Him, no matter the risk? Are you willing to give Him the place in Your life He desires and the honor he deserves? Are you willing to leave behind the rest to follow Him? Then get your nets ready, because the people that God wants to save through your witness are on the way downstream. Let's pray.