

“Jesus in the boat”

Luke 5:1-11

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This sermon was preached by Pr. Sarah Semmler Smith at Trinity Lutheran Church

We occasionally have a tone issue in our house—and it has nothing to do with the piano, or tone like where my Grandma in church would hit every glorious note the organ wasn’t, singing to her Lord! No, the tone and hearing problem in our house sounds more like: If a someone is thirsty, it might be shouted “get me some water!” or an approach with puppy eyes and in an unnaturally high pitch voice will say “read me a book-eee!” Or, sometimes there are just tears, angry tears, at an injustice done, but no coherent words are being said at us. Funny, as parents how our ears don’t “work” sometimes. I’ll say, “I’m sorry, I can’t hear you when you ask like that. Can you try again?” And then, they will recalibrate, and a second request will be made, “Mama, can you get me some water please?” Or this time in an age-appropriate octave, “Mom, can we read and snuggle?” Or, the words will find their ways through the tears. And amazingly, the message seems to get through better, that second way.

Simple questions can be lost in human translation. Sometimes we hear a demand, where what was really meant was an invitation. Or, we can hear something so many times that our ears no longer catch it properly. That’s what can happen with this story from Luke today. If we don’t tune our ears to hear what’s really there, we might risk missing the life-giving message altogether. *So, can you hear me when I talk like this?*

I’m not sure what Simon would have been hearing, or not, that morning on the beach, as he washed his nets. I imagine him a bit ‘in his head’, as he ran his fingers through the rough twine: maybe re-adjusting expectations of wage and income for that week; re-assessing his ability to pay the loan on his boat, wondering what went wrong the night before? That’s when Jesus approaches, and asks him a small favor (like when he asks the Samaritan woman for a glass of water by the well). It’s a request, a simple question– that Simon could have refused: Jesus asks to use his boat, to put some space between he and the crowd he was trying to teach. (Water makes for a good natural microphone).

Perhaps, in his tired state, Simon thought ‘why not—it’s not like it’s doing me any good.’ And he takes Jesus out. And Jesus preaches to the crowd, does his thing. But unlike other teachings, we don’t hear about the content here, because the gospel writer wants us pull our focus toward what will happen between Jesus and Simon: When Jesus finishes speaking, instead of asking to go back into shore, thank you very much, and being on his way, he asks Simon to put out into deep water, and let down his nets for a catch. (or as it says in the King James version, “Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a drought”)

This might be like Tom Brady offering athletic advice to Yul Moldauer of the US men's gymnastics team. Brady might have six rings may but have no credibility coaching these kind of rings (*picture of Moldauer on gymnastic rings*). Right? So, I read some politely masked irritation in Peter's tone, when he responds to the carpenter/rabbi giving *fishing* advice: "Master, we've already been fishing all night" ... (then he relents) "but, at your word – I will let down the net."

Then there comes one net full of flopping, silver, Tilapia. And then another, and another and then – they have to call over to the boat still on shore for help, and they fill that boat, with nets full of more and more flopping, silver, tilapia, until their boats begin to sink. And it is there, among that catch, that Simon (now called Simon Peter) has a moment. In the Bible, a name change signals a life change. Think Abram to Abraham, Saul to Paul. So Simon *Peter* is having a change, and the God moment actually overwhelms him to the point of fright. He says, "Lord (notice, Jesus' name just changed too), "Lord, go away, I'm a sinful man.

Peter doesn't know what to do with what has just happened, but Jesus does.

First, he calms Simon's fears. Then, he gives him new purpose. Finally, Simon Peter chooses, to leave that great catch of fish, leave the nets, leave the boat—and follow the one whom he had followed into deep water, on a cross-country journey to a place he didn't know.

It reminds me of a prayer that begins: "Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrod, through perils unknown..."

I love this story, but I worry. When we hear this story of Simon Peter and Jesus by the lake, I wonder if it is so common, if we are so used to its tune, that we can't hear its beauty. Or that it's *for you*. I worry that even if we *do* hear it, we hear it in the wrong tone: We might hear Jesus' *invitation* to the first disciples a *demand* for us to drop ordinary life: as if the sacred and secular cannot go together, or that you basically have to be a monastic in the streets of Calcutta to answer this call. I worry we might hear a tone that is a forceful Bible-thumping, "*All or nothing! Drop the nets! Do better! Be better!*" in this gospel story.

It is true—there is a cost to discipleship. Jesus will remind disciples that to follow him is to follow him to a cross. But he will never demand or shame. That is not the tone he takes with his disciples, or with us. What he does ask, gently, is a simple question: "Can I get in your boat?"

Did you notice at what point Jesus extends this invitation to Simon? The fisherman wasn't rested, well fed, at his best self that morning. He was exhausted, from having 'banged his head against the wall' at a problem. He's depleted. *That's* when Jesus comes to him, not at his peak but when he is in a valley, humbled enough, perhaps,

to know he couldn't by his own reason or strength do it all. Jesus invites. Simon says, "okay." Okay, **you can come in the boat.**

And in that small act, that first small act of trust, there is an opening. Like a piece of yeast that will leaven a loaf. Or a mustard seed that grows to a tree. When Simon Peter allows for that first small step, Jesus asks to go a step further. Jesus --with that little bit of trust --says, "Okay, now trust me again, with a decision you care about and that maybe you've tried to solve on your own. Toss your net into deep water."

And we saw what happened.

I've asked myself, what was the difference between this fishing excursion and the one the night before? It was the same water. Same fishermen. Same net. What was different: **Jesus was in the boat this time. And the man of the sea, Simon, let the carpenter be captain.**

I don't know where you are at this morning. In the crowd, just hearing about, trying to get near this Jesus. Or, maybe you're cool with letting Jesus ride shotgun in your life's boat, but you're still clearly driving. Or maybe you've been traveling with Jesus for quite a while now, he takes the helm in many decisions, but maybe he's asking you to put out into deeper water, and that is something you're unsure of, or it's hard, or just uncomfortable but you know it's something you're being called to do.

What I hope you hear, wherever you are, is the **invitation:** of a God whose power is persuasive but never coercive; Who invites but does not demand; Who desires for each of us so much more than a surface kind of life; Whose ability to bring deep blessings even out of even the smallest acts of trust can lead you to your knees.

Thanks be to God for Jesus who shows up at our shoreline, inviting us into a life of deep faith, conviction & grace.

Let us pray these words together:

*Lord god, you have called your servants  
to ventures of which we cannot see the ending,  
by paths as yet untrod, through perils unknown.  
give us faith to go out with courage,  
not knowing where we go,  
but only that your hand is leading us  
and your love supporting us;  
through Jesus Christ our lord.  
Amen.*