

Art credit: Hilton Church; John Reilly



There are so many different approaches to this morning's Gospel and the other lessons that we could spend together this morning exploring. That realization is part of what makes our faith tradition a living tradition. We don't know all the questions let alone all the answers. Together, though, we can read, ponder, discuss, disagree, but hopefully learn something new about God and about ourselves and our role in this world as disciples of Jesus when we engage with our sacred Word.

As we do each Wednesday at Bible Study and at EFM on Sunday afternoons, we read the passages assigned and then consider what we heard: what surprised us, what dismayed us, what stood out for us that we had not heard before- and so on. As we read two weeks ago when Jesus read the scroll in the synagogue, he interpreted what he had read and told the people gathered that "today the Scripture is fulfilled." Each time we gather and consider the Scripture we are also interpreting it and discerning how it is true in our time. Some weeks it is pretty clear while other weeks it remains puzzling or even off-putting. Ask any first year EFM-er who reads about the times God orders the Hebrew people to kill all the men, women, children and animals of the lands that the people of God were about to enter and live in! Not the picture of God that most of us want to worship but those texts are part of our sacred teachings. They are something we need to wrestle with.

This week we have a scene that is probably familiar to most of us. We have worked hard all day (or all night) and at the end of our work it seems as if nothing was accomplished. Our "to do" list doesn't have many of the items crossed off on it that we so optimistically put on it that morning. And it might be because somebody called a meeting that we weren't planning on and a couple of hours later we're shaking our head at the waste of time that could have, we think, been so much better spent getting through our own list. Or perhaps someone in our family got sick and we had to leave work early to go and tend to them. They needed us and we needed to care for them.

For those of you no longer working for pay, it's really the same thing. Something interferes with the way you've planned your day. What you thought was going to happen didn't. Not anybody's fault – just the way things go sometimes. We just have to roll with the changes or stress out which does nobody any good. Particularly when that stress is accompanied by harsh words.

Simon, also known as Simon Peter or just Peter, and the other fishermen have been out working hard but no fish were to be found. So they call it a night and come back to shore. They are now washing and caring for their nets so they will be ready for the next time they are scheduled to go out.

And what happens? Jesus shows up and basically commandeers a boat so that Jesus can speak to the crowds who want to hear Jesus. Speaking from a boat a bit out on the water enables Jesus's voice to carry to those gathered. I imagine Simon, being grateful for Jesus having healed his

mother-in-law a bit earlier, is tired, wanting his own home and dinner, but Simon gives in and puts the boat back out into the water.

As David Lose encourages us: “hug the details.” Jesus finishes teaching and then tells Simon to move the boat further out into the deep water and put down the nets. Can’t you just imagine Simon grumbling and saying “but we just did that and nothing came of it. I’m really hungry. I just want to go home.” But Simon acquiesces with very important words: “If you say so, I will let down the nets.”

How I wish we had audio of that exchange! Was it whiny? Was it exasperated? Was it expectant? After all, Simon had witnessed Jesus healing his mother-in-law so Simon had some idea that Jesus could heal – and thus perhaps some optimism that Jesus could bring a catch to them even though they had short hours before fished in this exact spot with no results.

This exchange reminds me of the Renewal of our Baptismal Vows that we said last week when Bp. Jennifer was with us. There are several times where we are asked to affirm behavior and attitudes. The responses are: I will, with God’s help. I will, *with God’s help*. We are not alone in this life. We are not alone in our ministry. Jesus is with us – in the boat, figuratively speaking.

Another detail I’d like for us to remember is that there were so many fish that the nets were close to breaking. In one other account, the number of fish is reckoned to be 150. In Biblical times, it is believed that about 150 different species of fish were known. Thus, the reference to a catch of 150 different types of fish suggests that the ministry of Jesus is to and for the entire world. Yes, the Jews were God’s chosen people – but the rest of us are also invited into love and fellowship with God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. God’s love extends to each and every one of us, wherever we are and whatever we are doing.

Then note that both boats began to sink because there were so many fish caught. Abundance. Extravagance. Overflowing response to a need. Jesus at work in the world for the benefit of God’s people.

Simon’s response to this great gift is to fall down at Jesus’s knees and say “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” Go away from me for I am not worthy so much as to gather up a crumb under your table. And Jesus responds: “Do not be afraid.” As Jesus does so often, he responds not to the specific complaint or lack but rather “do not be afraid.” God loves us with all our faults and shortcomings even when- or perhaps especially when – we are afraid.

Rev. Danae Ashley offers some profound insight into this morning’s Gospel lesson that I want to share with you.¹ She writes:

Fear is paralyzing, though. It motivates us to maintain the *status quo* and to resist growing into who God is calling us to be. Fear is what made Saul of Tarsus, who would later become the apostle Paul, persecute Christians. Fear is what makes us believe we are not worthy of being loved—by others, by ourselves, and by God. Fear casts out reason.

¹ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/sermon/trusting-jesus-epiphany-5-c-february-10-2019> (2/9/2019)

Fear lacks God's imagination of wonder for the future. We can certainly imagine any number of horrible things that might happen, but it is more difficult to visualize something entirely new. Fear tells us it will keep us safe, but it does not tell the whole story. It also traps us and makes us unable to experience the freedom of what Jesus offers.

Yet, this is where God finds us. Just like Jesus found Simon Peter in his boat and Paul on the road to Damascus, God comes to where we are and asks us to do something that seems unthinkable, laughable, bizarre, or just plain scary.

There's a line from the movie *Junebug* where Amy Adams' character says to her not-so-great husband, "God loves you just the way you are, but he loves you too much to let you stay that way." With Jesus meeting us where we are, we have a wonderful opportunity to experience God's grace. We do not have to be perfect in order for God to want to be in relationship with us. We just have to be willing to drop our own baggage around our fears and follow, like Peter, James, and John did when they brought their boats, overflowing with fish, to shore.

Come, follow me. **Amen.**