

Fish in the Deep



Isaiah 6:1-8
 Luke 5:1-11

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Every time I grabbed the net, my knuckles felt stuck, creaking like old hinges. My eyes almost felt the same way, after being up all night, as though salt and sand had gotten into them and welded them shut. The worst of it was that we hadn't caught a thing – nothing – nada – niente, not even junk fish. How many times – thousands – did we throw out the nets and haul them back in, hand over hand, soaked with freezing water? At one point, as we washed out our nets, pulling at the seaweed and driftwood tangled in knots, with hands that felt like wooden blocks, James yelled at me over the biting wind, "Simon, why in the in the name of God are we still in this business?"

We'd been asking that question for a long time. It turns out that Herod Antipas, Herod the Great's son, got into the fishing business a few years before... big time. After his father died, he wanted to show the Romans that he could turn this poor backwater of Galilee into a cash-cow by milking us of our only real source of wealth – our fish. His cronies had already squeezed all they could out of the pathetic family farms in the countryside. But Herod had his eye on the Sea of Galilee, and so he built a brand-new city, Tiberias – named after the new emperor – right smack on the shore. Then he set up a bunch of warehouses and drying factories by the docks, and sent a fleet of fishing

ships out onto the waters. His plan was to corner the market on salted fish to sell to the whole empire. I think he figured that if he could show the emperor that he could make a lot of money and send it on to Rome, the emperor would make him some big mucky-muck, aristocratic governor like his father. It didn't quite work out that way.

Soon we started to feel the pinch: no fish. Where we used to bring home a decent catch at the end of a day – you know – fifteen, sixteen good-sized snappers; now, we'd be lucky with two or three. Then we started fishing at night – longer hours – just to feed our families. Then the Romans started giving us a hard time for fishing at all, saying we had to pay a tax or we'd be fined for taking fish out of the sea. Since when did anyone own the fish in the sea of Galilee? They said that the fish were reserved for their fleet, and they didn't want the competition. What did they want us to do, lay down and die? So, then we *had* to fish at night, to hide the fact that we were fishing at all. Plus, we had to look over our shoulders when we rowed in at dawn, just in case soldiers came to shake us down.

That day, we were on the beach cleaning out the nets, and the teacher, Jesus, walks up to us. We'd met him before. He wasn't like one of those snobby priests from Jerusalem; he was a local guy: calluses on his hands, old sandals, sunburn. He'd been teaching on the beach, and there were dozens of people waiting to hear him. He asked to borrow one of our boats, so he could talk to the crowd. I rowed him out and he stood in the sun, up on the seat, and talked to them about regular stuff – seeds and harvests and vineyards. When he was done, he looked at me and said, 'pull out there – into the deep. Throw out your nets.' I looked at him blankly; I mean, what's this guy telling me how to fish? We hadn't caught a thing all night and he thinks he can tell us to how catch something. Was he nuts? But I liked the guy and so I pulled on my oars and spun the boat around and took us out – two other guys and me, plus the rabbi – a few hundred feet offshore.

We tossed the nets into the water – these same nets we'd thrown thousands of times into the same water and came up empty. Bam! We got a hit like I'd never felt before – so strong I almost went overboard. As we pulled it in, with every muscle, we saw the water churning with big, healthy fish; splashing us and slapping our hands and faces as we hauled them out. We screamed for the other boat, and we filled both boats so full the water was almost up over the gunnels.

That was it for me. I decided to follow the Master. I begged him to forgive me, because he must have known I was a sinful man. He didn't blink, just lifted me up and looked me in the eyes and said, "Simon, now you'll be fishing for people." My heart filled with a joy I hadn't felt in years, and my eyes filled with tears. Who would've

thought that me, a washed-up middle-aged fisherman, would end up a disciple of the Holy One of God?

When in your life have you toiled all night long and come up empty handed? We know what it feels like to face futility: relationships that don't pan out, frustrations in a job or career, anxiety about health or sorrows after loss, struggles with depression or loss of self-esteem. Empty looks around a conference room, vacant stare in car seat, sadness around a dining-room table, or an ocean of hurt at 3 am in a kitchen? What would it take to go back out again into the deep and to fish in the rich, clear waters of God's promises?

Lord knows, we can experience this in the church. Our church is not the only one with fewer friends in the pews than in the days of yore. Since the pandemic and with changes in our society and culture, churches are not as popular or central to people's lives as they once were. Sometimes churches can feel like useless places, practicing old fashioned and outdated rituals and beliefs from a bygone era. Church can feel like the sea where the disciples labored all night: empty and unfulfilling, and quaintly amusing. This church has been meeting every Sunday morning on this spot since 188, for 137 years. How many Sundays? 52 weeks times 137 is 7,124 Sundays... throwing out nets, bringing in people to seek the presence of God, striving to grow in faith and spiritual depth, looking into the clear, fathomless waters of God's mystery and wisdom. At times it can feel pointless. What are we doing here? Why make the effort? What are we gaining?

But you know what? Not here. Here we still follow a savior who can offer abundance and fullness even in times of uncertainty and loss. Even when forces of history seem stacked against us, God provides avenues of renewal: a pathway out of slavery into a promised land, manna in the desert, a land of milk and honey, a stone rolled away from a tomb. Here in this place, waters are deep and the fish are running, harvests are plentiful and the boats filled to overflowing. Here souls are transformed and disciples created. Jesus is here in this boat.

Look what happens here, when we cast out our nets in faith:

- We will soon be welcoming a new pastor who will offer fresh visions of ministry and community building, and strong leadership into the future.
- We have received a wonderfully generous bequest from beloved Bart Brown that will serve to strengthen your ministry and the music program, while providing a secure foundation for years ahead.

- Our amazing music ministry, music minister and choirs enliven hearts young and old with stirring concerts, special presentations, incredible talent and creativity.
- Our worship fills hearts with inner strength, optimism and joy; offering our souls insight and inspiration.
- Our teachers share the great stories of our faith, asking children and youth important questions about the meaning of life, passing along deep values of compassion, community and faith.
- Friendships are formed through common work, rummage and antique sales, dinners and coffee hours, sharing our hurts and hopes.
- We provide caring and support those facing tragedy, illness or chronic pain. You visit and hold them in prayer, in our memory and in love.
- Our generosity provides resources for local charities and food programs, along with our denomination's global mission projects in the US and overseas.

Being part of a church means throwing out nets into the deep waters of God's grace, time and time again, week after week, year after year, and finding a community of compassion, spiritual fulfillment, and a spirit of joy. Our nets are straining with a catch of a new pastor, new plans, new visions, new projects – that we can hardly carry them in to shore.

Jesus shows us that life can be clear, joyful and strong, instead of depressed and empty. We look out over the wind-swept sea and worry that we will come up with nothing. But Jesus shows us that God intends for us to find fulfillment, a cup that overflows, bread of life, living water, loaves and fish that multiply, a great banquet to which we are invited. As we drop our own agendas, our Savior comes closer and closer to us, and we follow, becoming disciples who walk in his footsteps. Let's move out into deep waters and continue to throw out our nets. Amen.