

Luke 5:1-11
Put Out into the Deep
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1-15-17

The truth of faith is that Jesus leads us. He leads us into new experiences, new relationships, new opportunities. He also leads us through the desperate and wearying places so that he can lead us to a living hope in God. Sometimes the place where we discover hope is also the place where we lost it. Sometimes it's our failures, our let downs, our discouragements that provide the most fertile soil for Jesus to till and sow in his mercy and his grace.

During the Sundays between now and the beginning of Lent (the time of preparation for Holy Week and Easter Sunday), we are going to be looking at Jesus through the eyes of his most honest and authentic disciple—the one he calls *Rock*, (*Rocky*), Petros, Peter.

Peter, if you are not familiar with these narratives, is a follower of Jesus—what the Bible calls a disciple. Peter has a unique relationship with Jesus. He is one of his “inner circle disciples,” but that’s not because Peter is disciple of the month. Peter is real, Peter is flawed, Peter is guided—as we often are—by his passions. I think we need to look again at the Jesus stories through the eyes of Peter, because Peter is us. In fact, as we go through these next weeks, it would be interesting to see what difference in your hearing it would make if, when the Bible uses the word Peter, you inserted your own name there instead. Peter has his eyes opened by the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, and maybe you will, as well.

Interestingly, where we begin today and where we end six weeks from now will be almost the same place. This series will be bookended by fishing stories.

So I want to invite you, as you are able, to stand with me out of reverence and respect for God’s Word and let’s hear the Word of the Lord.

On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” And Simon answered, “Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.” And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.” And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

Two scenes converge here on the lakeshore. Peter and the others had pulled their boats on to the shore after a long and discouraging night of fishing. Their nets were empty. “Maybe we’ve got holes in them, we’d better pull them ashore and fix them so this doesn’t become a pattern—after all we’re professional fishermen, we’re supposed to catch fish.” Peter is supposed to be an expert at this, it’s how he makes his living. But this morning, he’s come back empty and disappointed. I don’t think he’s just having a bad day, I think he’s struggling with disappointment and discouragement over something that gives his life meaning and purpose.

Maybe there’s an area in your life that you feel like an expert. Could be a career, or a skill, a hobby, or maybe you just take great pride in being *master of your domain*. These are the areas where it is hardest for us to let Jesus lead—“no, no, I got it.” They are also the places in which we are most likely to experience discouragement when things go sideways. Peter lost his hope out on the lake, in the deep waters. Maybe it was in deep waters that you’ve lost your hope.

Maybe you didn’t get the job you hoped for, or were passed over for promotion for someone younger and less qualified, maybe life has changed for you and now it is just too difficult for you to do the things that once came easily for you. Whatever it is, we too can lose our hope. Our eyes can grow weary and dim from too many tears or too many unrealized expectations, our eyes can fall in discouragement, thinking that this is the best it’s going to be. This was Peter. Now Jesus comes to open Peter’s eyes to his true purposes with Jesus. That’s what we’re going to look at in these weeks to come.

Now, alongside these weary and emptyhanded fisherman on the shore of Lake Gennesaret comes Jesus. He’s being pressed in upon by a crowd of people, eager to hear the word of God. Here along the lakeshore, he’s as close to the water as he can be, and still he’s being pressed in upon. Beside him is Peter’s boat, so he takes it and pushes out a bit and sits down—his voice will carry nicely over the water and up the sort of natural amphitheater. There, Luke tells us that Jesus teaches the Word of God. This is what Jesus does, he preaches the Word of God.

When the teaching is finished, he turns to Peter and says Simon, **“Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.”**

Now, I imagine in this moment, Peter probably looked at Jesus and said, “Wow, that was some really great teaching Jesus, I enjoyed it...really. But what I need now is a nap. We were out all night, and as you can see, we came back with just our nets. Thanks Jesus, but maybe another time.”

Jesus says “Nope, no you’re not, you’re coming with me.” Why would Jesus do this?

Here, I think, is the teaching moment for Peter and for us. Jesus takes him out in the boat for a couple of reasons: The first is that Jesus joins us in our disappointments, so that he can lead us through our disappointments.

In this day in age, fishing happened in one of two ways. It was either shallow water fishing, in which they would cast a large net that would stay close to the top of the water and sort of skim the fish off the top. Or there was the deep water casting, in which weighted nets would go down and drag along the bottom scooping the fish up. And any fisherman worth his salt knew that the best time to fish was in the dark. It was during the night or in the quiet hours just before dawn. Peter and his mates had done this, and had come back with nothing. They were disappointed.

Peter, like you and me, deals with disappointment in a couple of ways. We sometimes ignore it. You know, put on a happy face, a sort of plastic grin because we think that's how Christians are supposed to be. We don't have bad days...at least, we don't let our face say so. Or we indulge in our disappointments, sort of wallowing in sorrows, you know like, poor me. We start to sound like Eeyore from Winnie the Pooh, things are bad and they're always going to be bad, oh bother.

You see, when we face disappointments, whether they come from our work or family or community, we get tempted to assume that our life is a disappointment. Don't ever confuse your living with your life.

Peter confesses to Jesus after Jesus tells him to put out into the deep again. It's so refreshing what he says: **Master, we toiled all night and took nothing.** Sometimes we need to experience the disappointment of things we think can support the weight of our faith, to realize that the waters money, power, success, acclaim, perfection, are empty waters. Part of Peter's experience of being drawn back into the waters of disappointment by Jesus is Peter realizing that the thing that he counted on to give definition and purpose to his life, namely fishing, could leave him empty.

The writer of Ecclesiastes spends an entire book in beautiful poetic terms describing this emptiness. He calls it vanity. **Vanity of vanities. All is vanity! What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, the ear not filled with hearing.**

Fishing wasn't a bad thing. The things we pursue are not bad things. But if we place our ultimate hope in them, they will simply never materialize. If we make good things like careers, possessions, accolades, degrees, even our families the best thing in our lives, if we give them first place, Jesus, like the writer of Ecclesiastes, is here to tell us that we will continually come up empty.

Then Peter says something beautiful, a simple preposition. Nevertheless, in our translation this morning, Peter simply says "but." A pastor by the name of Craig Barnes says this word "but" is an act of faith. **But at your word I will let down the nets.**

As soon as we come to the end of our striving after vanity and wind, as soon as we realize that the only thing we'll catch by defining our lives in these terms is emptiness, as soon as we allow Jesus to lead us back to our places of disappointment with him in the boat by our side... now we're ready for the gift he wants to give us: a new and living hope. When we realize that it's not about the fish, it's about the fisher^{man}.

This is the "aha" moment for Peter. Jesus is sitting across from Peter with a big smile on his face. It's not about the fish, it's about the fisherman. Jesus catches Peter. It's not about the fish, it's not about the results or the accomplishments; it's about the person, the heart. You'll notice that once Peter listens and obeys Jesus, it says that they caught such a large number of fish that their nets were breaking. And that the weight of the catch was so immense that it caused the boat to begin taking on water and begin to sink.

It would be awfully tempting in this moment to confuse the fish with the fisherman, to put more weight on what will come into our boat if we let the Savior in. Perhaps this is where we get some of the prosperity gospel leanings. Trust Jesus, obey Jesus, let Jesus into your boat and it will overflow with your catch. But if we do hear this as the meaning of this text, I think we—at the risk of

muddying the metaphor—have missed the boat. More specifically, we’ve missed the Savior who is in the boat with us.

You see, because it’s not about the fish, trusting God does not mean that all the vanity that we run after all of a sudden is anything more than vanity—it’s all still wind. The miracle of this story is that now in the boat with Peter is the fisherman. Jesus is the one who leads us back into the places of our disappointment and discouragement to redeem them and fill them with his holy purpose.

The second thing Jesus wants to show us is that he is the source of living hope. Jesus is the one who wants to lead us into a life rich with living hope. He wants to catch you, to captivate your heart, to tell you that he is always in the boat with you. How does he do this? He does it with a surprise.

You would think that the big catch of fish they brought in was the end of the story. It wasn’t, it was sort of the “aha” moment. This is the surprise grace that Peter wasn’t expecting. The Greek word for grace, the word *chara*, is a surprise word, it’s the unexpected interruption of God’s good favor in our lives. It wasn’t the huge catch of fish that caught Peter’s attention, it was the fisherman in the boat with him. Don’t confuse the blessing with the Savior, don’t confuse the mercies with the merciful one, don’t miss God in the midst of his creation.

I was talking with one of you this week, this person has been going through a prolonged time of health challenges. I asked them, how are you doing? “Oh, I’m doing good, I just found out that the treatment that I’m getting isn’t making my condition any better and that things may never get better.” And I thought to myself, how in the world can that be good? How can news that this person will, for the rest of their lives, be on the treatment—or one like it—that they’re taking now, eventually their body will succumb to the damage of treatment, how can that be good?

And I realized this: this person isn’t confusing the fish with the fisherman. They know who the source of living hope is, and he is sitting in the boat beside them.

It’s a humbling thing when we face the source of our hope. For Peter, it drove him to his knees. He looks at the fish, then he looks at Jesus, and he’s speechless with wonder. I mean, he’s seen Jesus, but he’s never *seen* Jesus. “Now that I see who you are, you must see who I am, get away from me for I am a sinful man.” And Jesus is just smiling because he knows that he has come to capture for life those who are sinful, that’s his mission. But Peter is overwhelmed. “You’re too powerful, you’re too glorious, you’re too stunning, all I could see was my empty nets and now the fish, but seeing you before me, you must get away for I am a sinful man.”

Jesus, with that glint in his eye, like he does so many times, looks at Peter and says, “You’re just the kind I’m looking for. I can use this. Pretty soon, Peter, you are going to be catching much more than fish. I’m going to use you to catch people. I will make you a fisher of people.”

Remember, when Jesus asked Peter to put out into the deep, Peter didn’t understand. We don’t often understand what and how we’re going to be used by Jesus. What is our life about? What’s it for? These are the questions Peter asked of himself, as well. Where is the struggle, where is the frustration, where is the discouragement, where is the failure, where is the nagging hope in your life that’s driven you ashore? Listen to the Savior, put out into the deep. All it took for Peter was a little word, that little preposition: But at your word I will do so. And do you know what? Jesus will take care of the rest. If this is what you say, then that will be my hope.