

Sunday, February 10, 2019
Rev. Jessica Paulsen
FPC, Corning
Isaiah 6:1-8
Luke 5:1-11

Called and Sent

How many people here are familiar with fishing? Going out on a nice lake, pole and bait in hand, and waiting to see what you might come up with--it can be a very nice way to spend a day--especially when our livelihood doesn't depend on our results.

How many also know of dealing with the stress of work each day? Blair Monie writes, "Studies of American workers consistently show that the majority (around 70 percent) of workers are dissatisfied with the amount of stress they experience in the workplace. Economic uncertainty, job insecurity, and inadequate wages are prime sources of stress among workers and families [and] these fishermen were not exempt from such daily stresses" (*Connections, Year C, Vol. 1*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2018. 238).

Now, keep all of that in mind as we put ourselves in the middle of this scene with fishermen, Jesus, and a crowd of people that has come to hear him teach. We're told the crowd of people was pressing closer and closer to Jesus and so when he sees some fishermen, cleaning their nets on the shoreline after their long night of work, he asks them for a favor--to take him out on their boat. Now that might seem like a strange request but N. T. Wright explains its practicality saying,

"Along the lakeshore close to Capernaum there is a sequence of steep inlets, a zigzagging shoreline with each inlet forming a natural amphitheatre. To this day, if you get in a boat and push out a little from the shore, you can talk in quite a natural voice, and anyone on the slopes of the inlet can hear you clearly - more clearly, in fact, than if you were right

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there on the shore with them. Jesus was simply exploiting the geography of the area and the ready availability of a boat.” (*Luke for Everyone*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2004. 53).

So Jesus teaches to the crowd, from a boat.

Now, there is another important detail we’re given which is that the fishermen caught nothing overnight. There were no great fish stories to tell after this night of fishing. The nets had come up empty. So, here’s where we’re at with the fishermen--they’ve been out all night trying to catch fish--this is their livelihood, what sustains them and their families so being successful at fishing is pretty important. And yet, after an entire night, they have nothing to show for it. They come back to shore without any fish. And then as they are cleaning their nets, Jesus comes by and asks for this favor. Okay...fine...we can grant one small favor...it won’t be that hard...just take him out a little bit so he can speak to the crowd...then we’ll be able to come back to shore, go home, and sleep before we have to do this all over again.

So when Jesus is finally wrapping up, what a relief that must have been. Finally, time to go back to shore, home, bed, sleep. Except no, that’s not the way things work. Jesus turns to them and says, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Are you kidding me?!?! We just got done cleaning the nets, after having caught nothing, and now he wants us to try again? If we do that, we’ll have clean everything all over again--let’s not and say we did.

But, no again. Simon answered, “Well, we caught nothing after working through the night. But I guess, since you say so, we will let down the nets.” And oh my goodness, after doing that, they have the greatest fish story of all time! A catch so big they had to call another boat to help haul it in--and it still almost sank both of the boats. But they did--hailed it in and made it to shore. What a miracle!

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And that's part of the lesson to be found here for us today. Against all logic and experience, Simon obeys Jesus and finds the catch of a lifetime. What a challenge that must have been!?! And as Howard Gregory puts it,

“The invitation to put out into the deep for a catch provides a sharp contrast to our human penchant for the predictable and the routine. It is an invitation to venture into new ground or new depths, but it also points to new challenges in mission and ministry for the church in every generation. We are challenged to respond to the urgings of God breaking into human lives.” (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2009. 334).

Everything that Simon knows, all of his instincts, are surely telling him to tell Jesus to forget it and head back to shore. But Simon has already seen some of what Jesus has done. He's seen him teach and heal--in fact Jesus has already healed Simon's mother-in-law--which we learn from the end of chapter 4. And so Simon obeys and does what Jesus has asked of him.

The lesson then for us, is after all we've seen Jesus do, after everything we've heard from him, everything we know about God, do we follow where God asks us to go--even when it seems to go against everything we know--when it seems that we're headed into new, uncharted territory (or deep water)? Are we willing to take the same risk that Simon did? Even when we're tired or burned out or worn out? For as Peter Eaton points out, “the cost of discipleship...is demanded of us after we have given everything that we can give. Jesus did not show up after a good night's sleep and a hearty breakfast. He came to find these men at the end of a long working day, after backbreaking labor, and he told them to keep on working” (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2009. 337). And he calls them. They answer and get the catch of their life.

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This seems to be part of the struggle in the church today. We're tired or worn out and in some places there is almost a defeatist attitude--let's just give up and throw in the towel for we'll never have the numbers we used to. And yet this story shows us the importance of paying attention and listening for God's call, even in those moments of tiredness or dejectedness--for we never know what might happen.

And we're still not at the end of the story. This miraculous catch of fish is not the end. For when they get back to shore--when it seems they might finally get to take that big catch home and get some sleep before they have to do it all again--Jesus says, "...from now on you will be catching people." And they left everything and followed him.

Everything they've just achieved--they leave it all behind. They could have been the heroes of the town--food for months on end for their families, plus extra to sell or trade, getting them even more needed supplies. And yet, instead of basking in the success of doing what Jesus had asked, they leave it all behind them. Jesus calls them once again to follow and they answer. They are called and sent out into the world.

So it seems it's not just when we might be tired that Jesus calls to us. But also when we might be in the middle of a big achievement--celebrating having done what had been asked of us. Which means Jesus doesn't leave us after the first calling--but he continually calls and sends us. So we must always be paying attention and following where Jesus leads--even when all logic might tell us to say no.

It's like President Bartlet from the West Wing always says when he finishes a project or conversation, "What's next?"

Once we answer God's call, we must always be ready to ask, "What's next?"

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So, friends, in the life and ministry of this congregation, in our relationship together,
“What’s next?”

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