



Sermon

The 5th Sunday after the Epiphany, February 9, 2025

Isaiah 6:1-13; Luke 5:1-11

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Christ Church Detroit

Fish. So very many fish that the very nets were breaking! Who doesn't love those images of God the multiplier of every good thing? Loaves and fishes and water into wine, and most especially the people that Peter was called to catch. Nets and boats full of fish, tables full of food and mountains and beaches and plains full of attentive disciples, and even synagogues and our present-day churches full. Wouldn't that be so lovely?

In many ways I think today's Gospel is an eschatological image. That is to say, a preview of the ultimate reign of God. While I believe that brief glimpses of God's abundance in the Gospels and in the present are true, they are especially true as a foretaste of the glory to come. That is, of God's ultimate reign breaking through time and space to embrace us in unlimited love. In a somewhat parallel miracle in John's Gospel, the abundance of fish is a sign of Jesus' resurrection. And in today's Gospel, the glory of God is literally breaking through nets.

We're supposed to hear about this, imagine this, dream of this, and hope for this kind of glorious fullness. Most especially during seasons when our leaders stoke fears of scarcity, we Christians turn to the stories of our faith to remind us that there is plenty awaiting us in the deeper waters. Our Bible stories don't need to be historically factual in order to be true and reliable. But here's the truth that contrasts the future promise: in the here and now, we sometimes come up short. Let's not forget that today's Gospel began with Simon Peter working all night and catching nothing.

And haven't we done the same? Worked so very hard on our parenting or our cooking or our gardening or our political campaigning or our pledge drive, only to find that the outcome was not what we had hoped for. So then we start to wonder: should we have worked harder or longer or used a better recipe or campaign materials? That's a bit of a besetting sin for our culture, isn't it? If we just worked harder we would get more...until we find ourselves working 24/7. At least Simon Peter had the good sense to know when to leave his empty boat and wash his empty net.

And notice that it was at just that moment of human vulnerability—of empty nets and emptiness of hope—that Simon Peter had ears to hear. “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch” (Luke 5:4). The fishermen who heard and followed this command then discovered an amazing catch; so much so that the very tools of their trade—nets and boats—were breaking and sinking. What a surprise! And then, more surprising still, they didn’t stay around for the fish fry. Instead, they “left everything and followed him” (Luke 5:11).

Which leads me to a few present-day questions: In our own moments of emptiness and exhaustion, should we hear Jesus calling us to fish in deeper waters, what are we to do? Where exactly are the deeper waters? I don’t know the answer for Christ Church—one thing about fishing is that it’s very location-specific—but deeper waters always exist. For the Bible tells us so!

For example, there was a time when the Episcopal parishes would not have considered climate resiliency grants in their mix of income, but you...you went fishing in those deeper waters and found a new kind of abundance. My own cathedral in California has a huge and—when I arrived—almost entirely unused undercroft. That’s Anglicanese for “basement”, but in our case it was really a nice gathering space with plenty of natural light.

When I arrived at Trinity Cathedral, I was informed that we couldn’t do anything to use or change the downstairs space because—once upon a time—we ran a summer vacation Bible school with 100 kids, who would need the whole space when they came back. Let that sink in. Full disclosure...we actually never had 100 kids in VBS! (I checked the vestry minutes.) But nevertheless, that deeply-embedded narrative had convinced a lot of Trinity members that our undercroft was no kind of deeper water to go fishing in. Now, Trinity partners with a community organization that serves 1,000 vulnerable people per month with food and clothing and referrals from that same undercroft space. Abundant Christian service from the underground recesses of our cathedral: that was our deeper water.

Is it possible that there is more deep water to fish in for you at Christ Church? I don’t know where, and even you may not know yet, but there is. I assure you, it is there.

But returning to our lessons, notice that’s the point where things got really complicated. When we find ourselves with unexpectedly abundant resources, what do we do next? If today’s Gospel is any guide, we pull our overloaded boats to shore and follow Jesus. That is to say, we leave that net-breaking haul of fish behind, and go looking for other shores.

I want to put a pin in that detail, because it’s something I myself usually want to gloss over. I’m always looking for the party at the end of the story: the wedding feast of the Lamb, to use the Biblical metaphor. And sometimes a great party with lots of fresh fish is just what we need. It’s a taste—a foretaste—of the glorious fullness of God’s reign. But we live in the here and now, when our nets may well come up empty for a season. And there are other times when we choose to leave even our fullest boats behind because we know that someone else is hungry.

Just two weeks ago, I was in Alexandria, Virginia. I spent a week at one of our Episcopal seminaries, training postulants for ministry with Spanish speakers. We weren't teaching them language, for the most part, but rather the skills of cultural competency needed to minister with new Episcopal communities—some of which will be Latino, some will be Middle Eastern or South Asian, and some will be young or gender non-conforming or with no prior experience of church. Realistically, they will be all of these: and also black and white and multilingual and multicultural—like you at Christ Church already are, thanks be to God, and like all the new communities of seekers you will welcome.

How we will do this isn't entirely clear. We're going to have to take risks and sometimes fail, and we're going to have to find resources in the deeper waters where we haven't fished before. We won't be doing it alone, though, because we're a connective church and we can learn from each other while we innovate.

But what we can know for sure is why we do it. I could see the "why" in the enthusiasm of the seminarians in Virginia; I could see it in the team that attended the mini-conference with The Episcopal Network for Stewardship (TENS) yesterday; I heard it in all the lessons this morning. We do brave new things because we discover the abundant glory of God in God's people—which Peter came to understand as real abundance. "Red and yellow, black and white, we are precious in God's sight!" People are the glory of God. "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isaiah 6:3). Your neighborhood and city and state are full of yet more of God's glory to be known.

So who will leave boats and nets and all the familiar ways of doing things at church and go into the world that is already looking for peace of God? You know the answer better than me. "Here am I...

"...send me!" (Isaiah 6:8).

Amen.