

Read lesson: Luke 5:1-11

Let us pray: O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our rock and our risen redeemer. Amen.

Let's talk a little about fishing this morning. There is a lot of fishing in the Bible. Much of the story of Jesus takes place around the Sea of Galilee, which is actually an inland lake, not nearly as large as Lake Michigan, but a good lake for fishing. Some of Jesus' disciples were fishermen by trade, coming from families of fishermen, earning their living on the lake, spending their time maintaining their tools: tending to boats and mending nets. They were hard-working men with strong backs and rough hands.

I learned early on that people who like to fish are unique, more patient than many of us. My Uncle Newell went fishing almost every Saturday all summer long. I used to watch as he crawled around on his hands and knees in his backyard after dark, with a flashlight looking for night crawlers. He would store them in a paper bag in his refrigerator until Saturday morning when he loaded them, his tackle box and rod in the trunk of his Plymouth and headed out. My dad wasn't a fisherman, so I did not come from a fishing family. But I asked Uncle Newell many times to take me along, and finally he did. In fairness, he warned me that it might not be very exciting—which turned out to be an understatement. We drove into the country to his favorite stream. He baited a hook, gave me a rod, showed me where to sit on the bank, left a bologna sandwich and thermos of water, said "good luck," and left to go upstream.

And there I sat and sat and sat. Nothing happened. Nothing happened all day. I didn't catch a thing; never had a bite. I sat there looking at the stream and my line. The only excitement was the bologna sandwich, which I ate after a half hour or so. Although I've had several subsequent and much more enjoyable experiences, that's about it for my fishing career. But I love these biblical stories, and I love being on the lake, wind in what's left of my hair. And I love watching the lights of the shrimpers off Key West at night; their lights blinking comfortingly, occasionally watching them through binoculars as they find fish and haul huge, full, dripping nets up out of the water and over the side.

So I love these fishing stories, and I love this one particularly.

It's the first fish story in Luke's Gospel. Jesus was standing beside the lake, people were pressing in on him, eager now to hear what he might say, since his reputation had begun to spread throughout Galilee. Two fishing boats were there with the fishermen, one of whom was a man by the name of Simon, whom Jesus would call Peter. It was Peter's boat Jesus commandeered and put out a few yards and used as a kind of pulpit to address the crowd.

Luke doesn't tell us what Jesus said that day, just that when he was done speaking, he said to Peter, "Let's go fishing." Peter had been fishing unsuccessfully all night long. He was on his way home for breakfast and a nap. But for some reason he agreed: he put out into deep water, followed Jesus' suggestion, lowered the nets, and to his great astonishment and obvious joy, caught so many fish that he had to call to shore for help. Both boats caught more than their quota—their capacity, in fact. And at that moment, Peter said the most extraordinary thing. What he should have said—what I would have said—is "How did you do that?" and especially, "Would you mind meeting me here again tomorrow morning?" Instead Peter said, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" "Depart from me," the older translation says.

Luke's telling of the story of Jesus consistently focuses on human need and Jesus' compassionate action to meet that need, whether it is sickness, isolation, physical handicap or hunger. This story is only peripherally about human need: hunger and food. This story, right at the beginning of Luke's account, is about something else: about the human experience of something other, something strange and unexplainable, something holy and mysterious. This story is about the experience of something that cannot be explained and the reverence it evokes. And I'm concluding that what the Bible is saying here is that that experience of the sacred, the experience of God, if you will, and the subsequent attitude of reverence—awe—sometimes bordering on fear, is a human need as real and critical and urgent as our need for food and drink.

"Depart from me for I am a sinful man" was Peter's response to this experience of a power, a reality that simply didn't fit into his worldview, which, after all, was based on a working man's common sense and worldly wisdom. Things like this just don't happen.

In the Bible, the first human response to the presence of God is awe, fear and terror. Isaiah's experience in the temple is a prototype.

The temple is filled with the smoke of incense and Isaiah sees God and his response sounds a lot like Peter's: "Woe is me! I am lost . . . yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts."

Awe in the face of mystery, humble acknowledgement that there is more to reality than we can comprehend, reverence for God and God's creation, is the heart of religion and, in the Bible, the essence of our own humanness.

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Sometimes it seems like our culture is a conspiracy against reverence not only in the way that culture cheapens and demeans and commercializes our humanity but also because we are accustomed to the notion that if something doesn't make sense, it isn't real. We've been thinking like that for several centuries, since the Enlightenment, when Western civilization discovered the scientific method and concluded that the only reality there is, is what we can see and touch and weigh and measure—our devotion to our own reason, our intellects, as the sole definer of reality.

God is a greater reality than anything we have thought or imagined, and that God is a mystery—literally incomprehensible—is profoundly unsettling for some. But it needn't be, because our own scriptures alert us to the fact that the presence of God is much, much greater than our own ability to understand or imagine and that when we encounter God, it is an experience of awe and reverence.

Anne Lamott, popular author, irreverent, funny Christian, often talks about her writing and her faith. Someone asked her about her prayer life and she said, again, that the two best prayers she knows are, in the morning, "Help me, Help me, Help me," and at night, before sleep, "Thank you, Thank you, Thank you." She now has a third prayer she prays at least once a day, a short prayer, a one-word prayer : "WOW!" You should say "WOW!" to God at least once a day, she advises.

Sometimes religion itself forgets that at its heart it is about a mystery, about a reality that cannot always be understood, a reality that is greater than human reason itself.

Sometimes in order to be market friendly and reasonable and attractive, religion seems to forget that its subject is God, about whom St. Augustine once said to a surprised group of students, “We are talking about God. What wonder is it that you do not understand? If you understand, then it is not God.”

Author Annie Dillard thinks that mainline churches are altogether too reasonable. The more liturgical churches are all too professional and reasonable “as if they know what they are doing,” she says.

And Methodist theologian Leonard Sweet quips, “Whereas Peter cried out, ‘Depart from me, O Lord,’ today we cry out, ‘O God, you make me feel so good.’”

This is why, by the way, in the Presbyterian tradition, our public worship service begins with a symbolic entrance to God’s presence—a call to worship when we understand that we are moving into God’s presence. That is followed by a great hymn of Praise—which is then followed with an acknowledgment of our human limitations, our failure to be all we could be.

In the great tradition of Simon Peter, it is an attempt to express the truth that the encounter with God is a human experience of awe and reverence and humility; that faith begins in the human heart and soul with an acknowledgement of God’s mystery and greatness and then and only then proceeds to a sense of God’s gentle, personal, transforming love.

I love the fact that Jesus pretty much ignores Peter. “Depart from me,” Peter says, expressing the human experience of awe and reverence and fear in the face of the holy. But Jesus doesn’t do it, he doesn’t depart from Peter. Rather he stays with Peter, and changes Peter’s life. He transforms him, and commissions him to go fish for people. He gives Peter a new life, a new truth big enough and good enough to live for and die for—which is exactly what Peter will end up doing.

Peter’s first response to the reality and power of God as it came to him in the person of Jesus was to back away. The invitation to be a follower begins with a sense of God’s mystery and transcendence and our own smallness and inadequacy. That is as it should be. To be a disciple is no small matter.

One of the familiar pictures of Jesus that adorns the walls of thousands of Sunday School classrooms comes from an image in the Book of Revelation. “Behold, I stand at the door and knock.” The picture is of Jesus, with a lantern in his hand, knocking on the door of a neat little cottage, probably somewhere in the Upper Peninsula.

The message is that Jesus comes and knocks on the door of every human heart. But in light of this text, maybe we ought to be careful about answering the door. Maybe we ought to think a little bit before inviting him into the home that is our heart. If you invite him in, he may start rearranging the furniture, may clean the place up, may discard some old worn-out pieces and add some new ones, may give the place a whole new look and feel.

And maybe that’s not what you want. Maybe you’re perfectly satisfied with your life as it is. But maybe somewhere in the depths of your own spirit that’s exactly what you know you need: a rearrangement, new look, a new direction.

It begins with a sense of reverence at the mystery of God—when, in addition to “Help me” and “thank you”—we say daily, “WOW!” It begins when we awaken to the presence of God in the heartbreaking beauty of sunsets, the power of a storm, the passion and love we feel, the gorgeous beauty of art and music, in the pain of children orphaned by earthquake when, in Rabbi and theologian Abraham Heschel’s good words, we recognize “the lifting of the veil at the horizon of the known, opening a sign of the eternal . . . a glimpse of [God’s] beauty, peace and power” (*I Asked for Wonder*, p. 17).

“The miraculous catch,” William Sloane Coffin says, “was not the haddock and shad and whatever else Peter and the rest of them caught that day, but the fact that Peter and the rest were caught up, even as we are, in the net of Christ’s love” (*Credo*, p. 25).

“Depart from me,” Peter said to Jesus. And the good news is that Jesus didn’t—and does not—depart but continues to be with us, to remind us of the mystery of God, and to invite us, as he did Peter and James and John on the lakeshore, to “leave everything and follow him.”

Amen.

*We come today from busy, hurried lives, O God,
full of things to do and places to be, from morning till night.
Settle us down; quiet our spirits. Startle us with your truth.
Surprise us with your gracious presence in the world and in our lives.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*