

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
Feb. 6, 2022

The Lessons: Isaiah 6:1-8
 Psalm 138
 1 Corinthians 14:12b-20
 Luke 5:1-11

The Hymns: # 795 *Voices Raised to You We Offer*
 # 856 *O Christ, Who Called the Twelve*
 # 949 *Heav'nly Hosts in Ceaseless Worship*

The Collect: O Lord, keep Your family the Church continually in the true faith that, relying on the hope of Your heavenly grace, we ay ever be defended by Your mighty power; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reign with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Sermon:
 Deep Sea Fishing
 Luke 5:1-11 and Isaiah 6:1-8

“Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch”

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

Today the Son of God continues to reveal himself to people – this time not only to the crowd that has gathered to hear him teach, but especially to a group of fishermen at the Lake of Gennesaret. Actually, that was one of several names for the same body of water that we usually refer to as the Sea of Galilee.

Today’s lessons hold a number of important truths for our meditation. Under the guidance of God’s Holy Spirit let us focus our thoughts on the theme: **Deep Sea Fishing.**

Tired Fishermen

First of all, our text leads us to a band of fishermen -- tired fishermen. There’s the brothers Peter and Andrew, and their partners James and John, another set of brothers. Together, with their parents they operated a fish market. They would go out and catch fish on the Sea of Galilee, and then sell them at the market. On this particular occasion they had labored all night – but with no luck! Back breaking work, it was, and frustrating as well! Gathering the nets, casting them out, pulling them in empty – over and over again. All night long! Hard work, but nothing to show for it.

But the labor doesn’t end with the dawn. Now they have to come in to shore and clean those empty nets – and that’s hard work, too! Pulling out the seaweeds and shells and whatever other useless garbage the nets had corralled. Useless work! Nothing left to do but go home, empty-handed!

How would they feed their families? How would they pay the Romans their taxes? Their livelihood was at risk! And it's not only a financial problem, but a spiritual one as well. What do you think when you fail? How do you feel? Is it the fault of the fish? Is it your failure as a fisherman? Shouldn't God care? Why doesn't He help you? Maybe you haven't prayed often enough, or lived a good enough life to win His favor. Well, maybe tomorrow things will improve.

But today wasn't finished. Jesus, the rabbi, wants to use one of their boats as a pulpit. The crowd had followed him to the lake and he needed some space, so he asked Peter if he could use his boat. And when he finished speaking, he tells Peter to go out into the deep and let down his nets for a catch.

Deep Sea Fishing

But why would anyone expect to catch fish out there, in the deep? Fish feed in the shallows, among the reeds. Every fisherman knows that. And what is "the deep", anyway?

We first hear of "the deep" in in the first chapter of Genesis where we are told: "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the **face of the deep**. And the Spirit of God was hovering over **the face of the waters**. It seems that the deep and the waters are connected. And the deep has a face – the face of darkness! That's the abyss of chaos from whence God can summon the "fountains of the deep" to unleash their watery darkness to flood the earth in the days of Noah. The deep waters are where the sea monster, Leviathan, lives, whose power and fury can only be tamed by God (Job 41:31).

Go out into the deep, Jesus tells Peter, and let down your nets for a catch. Peter objects: "We have been fishing all night and caught nothing", he says. And yet, he consents: "But, at your word I will let down the nets." Notice that the word of Jesus is not only a command, but also a promise: let down your nets **for a catch**. Jesus expected and in fact promises a catch! As unlikely as Peter thinks that will happen, he nevertheless responds to the word of Jesus.

And what happens? In the most unlikely of places, out there in the deep, a catch so large that the nets begin to break, the boat is filled with fish, so many that another boat must be brought out, and both boats began to sink! What Peter and his fishing partners have labored for all night long without success, Jesus is able to provide instantaneously and in abundance!

"Woe Is Me!"

Peter realizes that this is nothing less than an encounter with God! An encounter with the God who brings the order of the earth from the darkness of the deep, the God who summons forth the fountains of the deep to wash away the evil of sin, the God who sets limits for Leviathan and the sea he inhabits, -- such an encounter with God can only be met with awe -- and despair. "Woe is me", Isaiah says in today's Old Testament lesson, "for I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"

Peter's encounter with God is no less frightening: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." To escape from God is our immediate reaction when faced with the holiness of God. Condemned by our own sinfulness, we seek to escape. Adam and Eve were the first to try to escape from God by hiding in the bushes. But God comes looking for us and we realize that all our efforts to be good, to

please God with our own attempts at self-righteousness is in vain – as futile as the fishermen working night and day with nothing to show for their labor.

Jesus, the Divine Fisherman!

But notice what happens. God doesn't punish Isaiah for his sinful life. Instead, he cleanses and purifies him when the angel takes a coal from the altar of sacrifice and touches his unclean lips! Nor does Jesus heed Peter's plea to depart because of Peter's sinfulness. No way is he going to do that. Instead, he addresses Peter with words of assurance and comfort. "Do not be afraid" he says. When the holiness of God causes fear and repentance in sinners, God extends another word – the word of grace and forgiveness.

That is because Jesus is the Divine Fisherman. He left the shore of heaven and came into the chaos and darkness of this world to cast the net of the Gospel of Salvation to all who are enslaved by the darkness.

Not only did he enter the darkness, he submitted to it. St. Paul tells us that Jesus "humbled himself, taking the form of a servant...he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross".

Jesus was sent by the Father to gather all trapped by the darkness of sin and bring them into the joy of sins forgiven, of freedom from the fear of death, the joy of eternal life! Jesus was the first one to be sent into the darkness, but he wouldn't be the last.

Fishing For Men

To the astonished fishermen, Jesus would now invite them to a new vocation – a calling that would make them fishers of men.

The darkness of this world is deep. In a recent podcast on Issues, etc., Dr. Leonard Payton, pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church in Forest Park, Illinois, identified what he called the Three Systemic Evils of (North) American Culture: Systemic Idolatry, Systemic Sexual Perversion, and Systemic Greed. Worldliness, he says, is the "whole system of things that work together to make evil seem normal or even good". In other words, worldly culture not only enjoys living in the depths of evil, but works to convince people that in the deep is where real freedom is found – freedom to pursue whatever false gods you wish, freedom to engage in what sexual perversion you desire, freedom to greedily pursue and obtain whatever you covet and desire.

Jesus came to rescue mankind from such evils through his own death and resurrection. And now he sends his church out into the depths to announce his victory over evil. Martin Luther said that the net that brings sinners into the light is, in fact, the Gospel – the good news of Jesus.

This, of course, is the ongoing work of the Church – to proclaim the good news, to invite all trapped in the deep darkness to experience the light of God's love in Jesus Christ.

We hear that conversion therapy is now against the law in Canada. And, as I understand it, there are some aspects of conversion therapy that should be outlawed. But the frightening thing is that the government has not provided clear definitions as to what conversion therapy really includes.

But I bring this up because conversion has always been God's purpose in this world. In fact, our catechism attributes conversion to the work of the Holy Spirit and quotes Psalm 51:13 – "I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners will turn back to You." This is indeed the deep desire of God who wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

Let us encourage students who are studying to become "fishers of men" today, and support those who teach and administer our seminaries. And let us sustain and strengthen our pastors and deacons in their ministry. And let us not be ashamed to speak always of the joys of salvation and invite others into the safety of God's boat, the church of Jesus Christ. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.