

Deep water

Luke 5:1-11

Last week in church we heard about the call of Jeremiah to be God's prophet. You might remember that Jeremiah responded with something like "No, no, God. You've got the wrong guy. I'm too young, I'm only a boy. I can't speak for you... you should call someone else".

And similarly, in today's Old Testament reading, we heard about the call of Isaiah, and we heard that he said "'Woe to me!' I cried. 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips,'"

It seems Isaiah thought he was unsuited to be a prophet, just like Jeremiah... but God made it right: God equipped Jeremiah and Isaiah to take on the tasks to which God had called them. Of course, it wouldn't always be easy, and they would often be out of their depth, but God empowered them, and they spoke the word of God to the people.

Today we've also heard from the gospel of Luke – about the call of Jesus' first disciples. The account that Luke gives us is a bit different to the account that Matthew and Mark give us.

Mark tells us ¹⁶ "As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." ¹⁸ At once they left their nets and followed him.

¹⁹ When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. ²⁰ Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him."

Matthew's account is almost word for word with Mark's. But Luke gives us a bit more detail.

In Luke's gospel so far, we've had the narrative we're so familiar with from Christmas, the account of Jesus' baptism by John, after which Jesus was led into the wilderness to be tempted (which we'll go back to in a month's time, on the first Sunday in Lent).

After the wilderness, Jesus' ministry started: Luke chapter 4 tells us of him preaching at the synagogues, driving out an impure spirit, and healing many people – including the mother-in-law of Simon.

Then, as we've heard today, Chapter 5 begins, "One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets."

Already, right at the beginning of his ministry, people were crowding around Jesus – they wanted to hear him. I think of the line in the musical Jesus Christ Superstar: *"Why'd you choose such a backward time and such a strange land? If you'd come today, you would have reached a whole nation Israel in 4 BC had no mass communication"*. But while they had no mass communication at the time, word certainly spread quickly.

It would be hard to speak to a crowd standing on the shore – no dais no lectern. It's a problem: how do you speak to a crowd when they are pushing forward to hear you? Jesus' solution is to use one of the boats. He chooses the one belonging to Simon, possibly because he knows Simon already, from healing Simon's mother-in-law - and Simon was probably willing to help out because of that healing too.

Jesus got into Simon's boat, Simon took him out a little bit, and Jesus sat down in the boat and began to teach. And as an aside, in our culture we tend to stand up to teach – whether in church or a classroom or a lecture hall – the Jewish tradition was to sit down to teach.

We don't know what he taught. We don't have an account of the Sermon on the Lake to go with the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain. Luke's focus is on what happens next, and we read that "When [Jesus] had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." (5:4).

This episode began with the fishermen washing their nets – they'd finished fishing for the day – and here Jesus was telling them to go out into deep water and fish some more.

Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything."

It's been a long day. He'd fished, unsuccessfully, and then Jesus had interrupted his cleaning and packing up of his fishing gear, and he'd sat through a long sermon. We don't know how much Simon knew about Jesus at this point, he knew was sharing God's word and he knew he was a healer. I guess he might have picked up he was a carpenter... but there would have been no indication that Jesus knew anything about fishing. In fact, it's often claimed that the deep water in the middle of the day is not ideal fishing conditions...

Simon, this tired fishermen, said "But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

As I imagine this scene, I think of Simon sighing. Or maybe even rolling his eyes.

Even though he didn't think it would work, he followed Jesus' instruction. It's probably reasonable to say he knew it wouldn't work. But it was Jesus asking... and so he went along with him.

And we read in verse 6 and 7 that "When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signalled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink."

This wasn't just an unexpected catch. This wasn't just a good catch. It was an unimaginably big catch. It was a miraculous catch. They filled two boats so full of fish that the water would have been lapping over the gunwales, and they were starting to sink on their way back to the shore.

When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" (5:8)

Jesus had healed Simon's mother-in-law, and that was pretty good. But Simon didn't know much about medicine. He'd listened to Jesus' sermon on the lake, and that was pretty good, but Simon didn't know much about that sort of stuff. But now Jesus had delivered a miraculous catch of fish, and Simon know a lot about fishing. And so he knew that Jesus was truly something more.

"Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" Or perhaps "I am not worthy" Or maybe "I don't deserve this". As we get to know Jesus, we can often think similar things. There's so many things wrong with us that we don't deserve God's grace. We are not worthy of Jesus. We might know that Jesus died for us, but in our hearts we feel that we are unworthy.

"Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man".

We heard something similar in our Old Testament reading too "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips..." (Isaiah 6:5a)

And from John the Baptist last month “But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. (4:16)

These people, all unworthy, yet called them!

Later in this chapter of Luke’s gospel we read “But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus answered them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” (5:30-32)

I think this is something that people in the church often get wrong – and people outside the church usually get wrong. People often think that Christians are (or at least should be) ‘better’ in some way – more honest or more moral or more trustworthy. Sometimes we are, often we aren’t. But even if we are, that’s not why or how we became Christians.

We become Christians only because of God’s grace. We become followers of Jesus only because God has blessed us with a metaphorical miraculous catch of fish. We don’t deserve it. Simon didn’t deserve it. And yet we receive it.

Jesus tells us later in John’s gospel that we should be known, not by our ‘goodness’ or our ‘respectability’ but by our love.

I can imagine Simon trembling with fear and awe as he said “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man”.

Then Jesus said to Simon, “Don’t be afraid;”

Do you know what the most common command in the bible is? It’s that. “Don’t be afraid”. 81 times in the NIV translation. Many more if you count phrases like “Do not fear” and “fear not”.

We heard it a lot in our Christmas readings – every time an angel appears, he says “Don’t be afraid”. It’s there throughout the bible, from Genesis to Revelation. Do not be afraid.

It’s a great command. The world can be a scary place. We need to be reminded that even in the face of all the fears of our world and our lives we can know that God is with us. When we’re in the deep water of our lives God is with us.

Verse 9 tells us that [Simon] and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon’s partners.

They all knew that they were in the presence of something – someone – far greater than them. They hadn’t done anything to earn this catch. Their diligent efforts overnight using all their skill and knowledge hadn’t yielded anything of note. But following Jesus’ directions had taken them out into the deep water and yielded a catch they didn’t earn and didn’t deserve.

Jesus tells these fishermen, these skilled, experienced, well-equipped fishermen, that now they’re going to do something else. “From now on,” he says, “You will fish for people.”

And you know what? As they had this miraculous catch – the best catch of their lives – they walked away from it. They left their catch, and their fishing gear, and their boats, everything they had, and they followed Jesus.

We read “So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.” (5:11). Their lives changed.

As we encounter Jesus, our lives change too. We may not be called to walk away from all the things we know as these four fishermen were, but our lives need to change. We do grow in the knowledge and love of God. We will be transformed, but we won't be made perfect this side of the new creation.

Sometimes following Jesus will mean that we end up in deep water too, and we will find ourselves in situations when we will be out of our depth. So let's hold in our hearts and minds the command that is also an assurance to us all: "Do not fear".

Amen.