

“When the Going Gets Tough”

Luke 5:1-11

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February 28, 2021 Second Sunday of Lent offering God the gift of our Perseverance

Today our theme is offering God the gift of our perseverance. And we are going to get into that topic by way of the call story we just heard in Luke 5. Imagine this scene with me. How many have you have ever been fishing and got skunked? It’s disappointing when we’re out for fun with our kids or our friends and come up empty isn’t it? But it’s a whole different scenario when fishing is your livelihood. That was the reality for James and John and Simon Peter when we pick up their story. They had been out all night, working, and they got skunked. No fish meant no food for their families and no income from what they would sell for others. I picture them dirty, and sweaty and discouraged as they wash their nets that morning – probably vacillating between wanting to get home to rest and dreading telling their families they’d come up empty.

All of a sudden, Jesus shows up, and a large crowd is following him. This is the third preaching event that Luke records. In the first one, Jesus is at home in Nazareth – and it doesn’t go so well. After Jesus declares himself to be the anointed one, the people are filled with awe and seek to throw Jesus off a cliff. In the second incident, the opposite happens – Jesus preaches and the crowd tries to prevent him from leaving. Now, Jesus is backed up against the edge of the lake and once again, the crowd is pressing in on him. Suddenly, Jesus steps into Simon’s fishing boat and asks Simon to row him a little off shore. I can’t imagine that Simon Peter’s first thoughts were charitable, can you? He just wants to go home---- does he see Jesus as a nuisance? But perhaps out of respect or a sense of obligation, Simon agrees and sits in the boat while Jesus teaches the crowds. When Jesus is done, he says to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”

I wonder what Simon’s first thought is here too, for he has a decision to make. My first response might have been, “Really, you’re no commercial fisherman, who are you to tell me where to fish?” But then – Simon has already seen what Jesus can do. Jesus has already healed Simon’s mother-in-law – I

assume he was thankful for that ó and that same evening Jesus healed many others, even casting demons out of some. Could Jesus make fish appear too? Finally he answers, òMaster we have fished all night, but caught nothing. YET IF YOU SAY SO I will let down the nets.ö

And indeed the catch is miraculous óthere are so many fish that the nets start to tear and both boats start to sink. It's a windfall!! And what is Peter's response? He is humbled. He falls at Jesus's knees saying òGo away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.ö This a common response to the presence of the Holy. When God calls the prophet Isaiah, his first response is, òI am a man of unclean lips.ö Others declared themselves unworthy for one reason or another. When we realize that we are in the very presence of God, it does that to us. And how does Jesus respond? Here he says to Simon, òDO NOT BE AFRAIDö òDo not be afraid, for from now on, you will be catching people.ö Jesus has just used Simon's boat to fish for people, now he is calling Simon to do the same.

And then what do Simon Peter and James and John do next? They leave the biggest windfall of their careers on the beach--- they walk away from it all to follow Jesus. And friends, we are here today because they made that decision.

Even though the men had seen a taste of what Jesus could do, I don't think they had any idea what was ahead of them, do you? There were amazing times ahead to be sure ó including the transfiguration and seeing Jesus do miracle after miracle. But there were hard times too ó times when they didn't understand, when they squabbled among themselves about who would be the greatest in heaven, and when their beloved friend and master was taken by the Roman authorities, tortured, and executed. During those three days, Peter will betray him, and they will all flee and hide in fear.

We'll get to this part of the story in more detail in a few weeks, but do you remember Jesus's first words to the disciples when he appears to them hunkered down in the upper room? He repeats the same words he told Simon on the beach that morning three years before, òDo not be afraid.ö

This call story in Luke should remind us of another miracle on the beach. We find this one at the end of the gospel of John. Now, many scholars say we shouldn't mix gospel references ó we shouldn't

jump from one to another, and there is good reason for that, but seeing these stories as bookends to the gospel story seem like more than a coincidence to me.

When the story in John opens, seven of the disciples are gathered by the Sea of Tiberius. Peter announces that he is going fishing. Is this a casual fishing trip with the boys or is Peter going back to his prior vocation? We don't know for sure, but there's a good chance he was considering returning to his fishing career, and everyone else decides to join him. Are they functioning in survival mode that day? Are they defaulting to what they know how to do? Are they returning to what's comfortable? Even though they are professionals, once again, they come up empty.

Once again it is dawn, and Jesus is standing on the beach. This time, there are no crowds. This time Jesus is dealing only with his closest followers. When they get within earshot, Jesus hollers, "You have no fish have you?" Are the disciples having de ja vu yet, or are they just annoyed that someone is pointing out the obvious. "No," they reply.

"Cast your net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." There appears to be no hesitation on the part of the fishermen this time, even though they do not yet know it is Jesus speaking to them. Do they remember the lesson from three years ago or have they just learned to hold their tongues? Either way, they cast their nets, and once again the result is miraculous — there are so many fish they cannot haul them in. When they realize that it is Jesus, Peter jumps into the water and hurries to shore, where Jesus welcomes them with fish and bread.

After the joyous reunion and breakfast on the beach, it's time for a hard conversation. Three times Jesus asks Peter if he loves him. As Peter affirms that he does, Jesus commands him to feed my sheep. He even warns Peter that the road ahead will be hard. And then he repeats the words from the beach beside the Sea of Galilee, "Follow me." Jesus is urging Peter to persevere, to not give up, to not go back to what is comfortable, and familiar, and not what God wants him to do.

And Peter obeys. He could have gone back to fishing for fish, but he chooses to persevere, to stay with his higher calling. Even in Peter's defeat and his weariness, God still has plans for him, just like he does for us.

So let me give us some very practical take-aways from this story today.

First notice that God's call often comes in the midst of our everyday life and work. God does not wait for quiet or settled times to call us. He uses the details of our particular time and place to catch our attention. Peter is tooling along, when suddenly he sees something that makes him stop and wonder "What in my life would need to change in order for me to follow?"ⁱ Friends, pay attention to the unusual and surprising things you may or may not see a burning bush, or the catch of a lifetime, but God will likely call you in the midst of your everyday life.

Second notice that in the call story in Luke, Jesus tells the disciples to cast their nets into the deep water. Deep water is symbolic for the chaos of the deep in Genesis. We must put our nets into the chaos of our own difficult moment in history and expect God to work.ⁱⁱ Shallow tentative paddling will not do it these days; we must be willing to take risks and go deep. We must engage in mission even when results seem unlikely. We must persevere. Will we fail, sometimes yes. Will living into our vocation bring some hardship and suffering? Probably. But there is suffering and a quiet desperation when we choose to keep our lives small.ⁱⁱⁱ

So this morning, I ask you to close your eyes and bow your heads. Take a deep breath and quiet yourself. In the Lukan story, Simon fell at Peter's feet in his unworthiness. Do you feel unworthy of a call this morning? Hear God say to you, "Do not be afraid. I have a plan for you"

On the beach in John, Peter needed to confess and move past his betrayal of the Lord. This Lenten season is there something you need to make right with God so that you can once again hear God's call to Follow Me?

In Luke, Peter, James and John walked away from the catch of a lifetime. As an individual, what might you need to walk away from to follow Jesus fully today? How about us as a congregation?

When things get hard, what is your default, what do you want to fall back on? What is our default as a church? Inside of defaulting, can we trust that holy abundance will come in the midst of barren waters? For this is the sign of a new vocation. So, imagine for a moment Jesus filling our nets to overflowing, imagine him serving us breakfast, and then turning us loose to fish for people. Imagine offering Jesus the gift of our perseverance as we continue to move forward.

ⁱ Pastoral Perspective, Feasting on the Gospels

ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Homiletical Perspective, Feasting on the Gospels

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.