

5th after Epiphany, St. Barnabas, 2025

Luke 5:1-11

The former chief rabbi of Great Britain, Lord Jonathan Sacks, describes his people in the following words: “It is true that if you read the Jewish literature and Jewish history, happiness is not the first word that comes to mind. We do degrees in misery, post-graduate studies in angst, and advanced guilt...” Those attributes could describe Simon’s complexion in this morning’s gospel...before Jesus arrives. The situation we read is illustrative of Luke’s theme of the “Great Reversal.” For the author of Luke consistently contrasts the lack of human potential with the reality of divine fulfillment. His stories suggest anticipation, preparation, embryonic fullness of time, an inauguration of the last things.

Simon, whom we know as Peter, has been laboring all night in vain, fishing with no reward. So he and his companions have given up. They have left their boats and are cleaning their nets in preparation for packing up. We can almost feel Simon’s misery, his angst, his guilt for not having accomplished what he set out to do.

Jesus, on the other hand, has been making his way through the region of the upper Galilee proclaiming a message. True, he has cured the diseases of a number of people, but the power of his message is what draws the crowds. Now he is standing by the lake, with the crowd pressing, crushing in on him. Why such urgency? Because they know that they have been listening to the word of God, and they want to hear more.

There is a sense in which you and I cannot hear the word of God because we are no longer equipped to hear. We live in a culture that drowns us with countless words, words that tell us all our desires are valid, words that tell us our desires are actually needs, words that elevate our needs to rights, words that advise that what we set out to do is the norm to which we are to aspire. Our culture has difficulty hearing the word of God in the midst of the din of words because our culture does not think theologically. Drowning in social media apps, podcasts of extremist conspiracies, words that flatten out the fact that there are real distinctions to be made between truth and fiction, we protect ourselves by saying that pluralism is characteristic of us and of our culture.

For example, the God of Islam, the God of the Hebrews, and the God of Christians is not the same, yet we often hear Jewish, Christian, and Islamic faiths lumped together as the Abrahamic traditions. Willard Oxtoby argues that a more accurate identification would be to refer to the Jewish, Zoroastrian, Christian, and Islamic traditions as Western religions¹ and the Hindu, Sikh, Jain, and Buddhist traditions we find in America as Eastern religions.² Perhaps the safest thing to say about religion in America is that what is venerated is our right to worship as we please, that American culture no longer constructs its questions and answers on the basis of the existence of the God of the Christian Bible, that the message of the Triune God is somehow more inaccessible to us. Yet a mystical calling compels us to sing, “Holy, holy, holy” to the Triune God.

It is ironic but true that in an era which has been dubbed the Information Age, we are becoming incapable of gleaning from the Christian Bible its critical information. Not only are we becoming less and less Biblically literate as a society; but when some of us do read the Bible, we examine the text with secular eyes. We look for historical examples or literary prototypes or stories that can be tested in scientific terms. Substituting manageable categories of analysis for transcendent perspectives, we attempt to make the Biblical story relevant to our lives, rather than looking at our world through God’s eyes.

¹ *World Religions: Western Traditions*, ed. Willard G. Oxtoby (Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2002).

² *World Religions: Eastern Traditions*, ed. Willard G. Oxtoby (Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Lacking theological education, we might read this morning's Gospel as we would any other piece of prose; and if we did so, we would miss its meaning. Finding it increasingly difficult to read this sacred text and hear what first century listeners heard, we lose not only the depth of its meaning. We lose something more important: We lose the capacity for religious experience. To hear the word of God, to experience God's truth, we need to listen to this morning's Gospel as if to holy poetry. We need to be alert to ancient resonances, echoes that beckon us to the dawn of life.

Two empty boats sit beside the lake. Jesus gets into the boat belonging to Simon and asks him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sits down and teaches the crowds from the boat. When he has finished speaking, still seated in the boat, he asks Simon urgently, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch. Go deeper, go deeper." At first, Simon protests but not before that Great Reversal: "Master," he says, the only time the word is used in the gospels, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."

The Lake of Gennesaret, also known as the Sea of Galilee, is in some ways like any other large body of water: Sailing on its vast expanse can be serenely calming; but when a strong wind comes up, its waters can be terrifying. Because of our own experiences with water, we know instinctively that the sea is symbolic of power. But from the Bible, we know something more about the Sea: From the beginning, God's spirit hovered over the water. From that water, life came forth. Through that water, God brought the people of Israel out of bondage in Egypt and led them into the promised land. From water, life continues to come forth. He who is the Word of God, Jesus, is urging Simon Peter to go deeper, to find life.

Those of us who live close to the ocean can easily take the sea for granted. Passing by or even over its waters is part of our daily routine. We chart its tides. We use the sea for our own purposes. Like Simon Peter, we know how to exploit its bounty, and we approach much of the rest of our life in the same way. We deal with daily tasks. We chart our goals. We manage our resources carefully. Until something interrupts us: Our employer lays off thousands of workers, and we lose our job. A significant relationship deteriorates and is broken. We are confronted with serious illness. The necessary losses of age force us to face our own death. In all of these events, when compelled to re-image, re-configure, even re-design our lives, we too are called to go deeper. But we have difficulty hearing that call.

"Put out, Simon. Put out." "But, sir, I've done all that. I've done my job. I've done everything I was supposed to do. I've worked harder than most. With the information I have, I must conclude that I have explored every avenue." Can you hear the echoes? There is Moses assessing his prospects: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?...I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now...I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." There is Gideon reviewing his options: "But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." There is Isaiah protesting God's call, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips." There is Jeremiah surveying life in human categories: "Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." There are we, hearing all the messages of our society and unable to quell the fear inside: "I've done all I can. I've done my best. There's nothing left." But still he calls us to go deeper. How?

How difficult it is to go deeper if one defines reality as only that which you can see, touch, hear, taste, and smell. If one defines oneself in terms of those five senses, what chance is there that we will ever penetrate the depths of human experience, the depths of human existence?

This month a book discussion on Wednesday nights is open to the parish. The book being read and discussed is N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird's *Jesus and the Powers: Christian Political Witness in*

an age of Totalitarian Terror and Dysfunctional Democracies. This thoughtful book points out the mistaken idea of many churches who have adopted an otherworldly piety, believing that going up to heaven is our goal. Reaching for an afterlife in heaven is not our purpose as Christians, say these authors. Rather, our task is to declare Jesus is Lord now, thereby imply that the would-be Caesar's of our day are not Lord and that God's purposes here and now in God's creation are our responsibility and our identity. Just look at the creeds.

The creeds arose from the early Church's collection of the depths of human experience and their appreciation of the fact that their combination of the distinctive practices of Christian worship with the scriptures of Israel accomplished something deeper than either of those marks of identity did separately. Every profession of faith through the words of the Nicene and the Apostles Creeds is gleaned from the Bible's critical information and the consensus teaching of the early Church, but the deeper meaning of the creeds is that they offer definition to Christian identity.

The creeds are not here because of us. We are here because of the creeds. They are not here because of our needs or our right to substitute other words for them. We have come here because their truths exist, because the creeds provide us with a testament to the reality of transcendent experience. We have come here to join in the profession of the creeds not to blanket the truth with a din of words but because the creeds profess truths beyond our senses, the unsolved remainder of all we can touch, taste, smell, see, and hear. We exist because of what the creeds tell us: "Go deeper, go deeper."

The great naturalist Loren Eiseley once spent time in a seaside town called Costabel and, plagued by his lifelong insomnia, [gave up] the early morning hours [to] walking the beach. Each day at sunrise he found townspeople combing the sand for starfish which had washed ashore during the night, to kill them for commercial purposes. It was, for Eiseley, a sign, however small, of all the ways the world says no to life.

But one morning Eiseley got up unusually early, and discovered a solitary figure on the beach. This man, too, was gathering starfish, but [when] he found one alive he would pick it up and throw it as far as he could out beyond the breaking surf, back to the nurturing ocean from which it came. As [each morning rose,] Eiseley found this man embarked on his mission of mercy...seven days a week, no matter the weather.

Eiseley named [the man] "the star thrower," and [he wrote how the star thrower and his predawn work contradicted everything taught us] about evolution and the survival of the fittest. Here on the beach in Costabel the strong reached down to save, not crush, the weak. And Eiseley [wondered]: Is there a star thrower at work in the universe, a God who contradicts death, a God whose nature...is "mercy within mercy within mercy?"³

It may be that the physiologically fit, the intellectually fit, the economically fit, the psychologically fit may survive the longest by this world's standards. But survival here is not the last answer; it is only next-to-last. Jesus called Simon Peter, and Jesus calls us, to draw from the SOURCE of strength and nurture, returning again and again to the depths beyond where the surf breaks to tumble us irrevocably to the shore, contradicting even death in the experience of the mercy that sustains us in spite of the worst life can do to us. For the worst of life is not the last. It is only next-to-last. The last thing waits for us on the distant shore, the strong arm reaching down to save, the star thrower who takes us home.

³ Parker Palmer, *The Promise of Paradox* (South Bend: Ave Maria Press, 1980) 46-47.

“Put out, Simon. I will go with you. Go deeper. Go deeper.” And Simon Peter answers, “On the strength of your word, I shall.” When they had filled their nets to breaking, their boats to the point of sinking, Simon recognized who it was who spoke to him the Word of God. “Lord...Lord, depart from me, for I am a sinful man.” Once more we feel Simon’s misery, understand his angst, experience his guilt. He is like us. Yet comes again a great reversal: heaven on earth. For Jesus says to Simon and to us, “Do not be afraid henceforth.” Literally, do not be afraid from the NOW. “Now,” a signal, an indicator of a critical moment. Now implies a crisis of decision in the lives of those who suddenly hear the word of God. Now when Simon is no longer a fisherman but a shepherd of humankind. Now is when the long way home to love and hope and faith is accomplished. Now is when God’s purposes are being fulfilled. Do not be afraid...from now on.

Today, now, Jesus calls to each of us, “When the totals of your plans and of your life’s experiences do not balance out evenly, I am the unsolved remainder.”⁴ “I am the vastness of new life, and I am with you. Go deeper. Go deeper.” Hearing that word, on the strength of that promise, you and I can cast out our nets and discover new life, a life of fathomless possibility...with God.

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⁴ Karl Rahner, *The Eternal Year*, 1964.