

EPIPHANY 5, Feb. 10, 2019, Year C

- The story we just heard about *the great draught of fish* is *not* the first miracle in Luke's Gospel. But, unlike Jesus' prior acts of exorcism and physical healing, we may feel *more able to relate to* this story. *Perhaps it's less difficult to imagine*, and more explainable in terms of *timing* and *old-fashioned luck*. But this is just the point. *This story is not about fishing*. Nor is it about how good fortune can change our attitude. *Instead*, Luke tells this story because of its powerful *metaphorical* significance, which we need to '*unfold*.'
- *Jesus encounters a crowd at the edge of the sea*. Luke describes the people as *eager to hear the word of God*. *Jesus begins teaching* them and a group of fishermen by the shore. But though they *listen*, *nothing* seems to sink in until some of them actively *participate* in what he is teaching. The spiritual writer, John Shea, helps us appreciate the heart of this story¹ ~ that *listening to the Word is not enough in itself*. And the power of the Word is *not unleashed until we are caught by it*.² The Word that Jesus shares is not just a bunch of *rules*, or *doctrine* to be memorized. He teaches so as *to bring light to darkness*, and *life to what has died*. And he does this precisely *to illumine darkened hearts and minds*, and *motivate faltering willfulness*. All this, so that people might actually *change how they live*. John Shea's special insight is this: that "*when fish are caught, they move from the darkness beneath the sea, into*" *the light above*.³ Shea's observation becomes all the more meaningful when we recall that the ancient *secret symbol* for Christians and churches was a fish.⁴
- *This is symbolism that we should want to recover*. Particularly if we remember *Israel's historic ambivalence about the sea, and its depths*. The story of Jonah comes to mind, and the beautiful poetry of the second chapter. There, Jonah gives voice to the experience of being trapped in the depths of the ocean among the kelp and the weeds. *For a land-based people*, who spent long periods as nomadic shepherds, *the sea was the worst place where Israelites might end up*. Remember *the Exodus*, and how

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God's people marveled at the way the "*fathomless deep*" overwhelmed their enemies, who "*sank into the depths like a stone.*"⁵ This is also why the Gospel '*calming of the storm*' episodes are so memorable. For Jesus exhibits the power of God to tame the most fearful aspects of nature, and bring order out of *watery chaos*.

- In our Gospel today, *neither* the crowd *nor* the future disciples appear to respond to Jesus' *initial* teaching in any notable way. And yet, some of *those who come to hear* Jesus' teaching soon "*will be pulled from darkness into light.*" As John Shea reads the story, caught fish that come up from the shadows into the light provide an evocative metaphor. "*Jesus will reach into the interior darkness*" of his listeners, "*and release a fullness beyond what they had previously known.*"⁶
- Here we come to the critical aspect of the story, and to the features that may have the most transformative power for us. *We should notice three things* that set the stage for what is about to happen.⁷ *People* have *listened* to Jesus teach, with *no* immediately noticeable effect. The fishing *nets* have been cleaned following a fruitless night of work. And after being pulled up on the shore, *one boat* is pushed off *just a bit*, but is *not yet* out on open water. *The hinge of the story, then, is signaled by how these three features of the story exhibit a significant change.* For this is a story about profound transformation, where dramatic change in *outward* circumstances symbolizes an equally profound *inward* change.
- Our clue to the significance of this moment is provided by *Jesus' brief conversation with Simon, who is not yet called Peter.* Notice how, after he finishes teaching, Jesus simply asks Simon to "*put out into the deep water.*" Jesus *does not first inquire* about the fishermen's previous night's work; he *does not ask* them about their goals for the new day, or about anything practical of that kind. *Simon*, probably mindful of Jesus' *earlier* healing of his

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mother-in-law, *is deferential*. Yet, he *does* point out that they have worked *all night* long, but have caught *nothing*. In other words, Simon points to the experience of *darkness*, as well as to *emptiness* and *scarcity*. So often, whether physically or symbolically, these are the things that defeat us ~ the *absence of illumination* and the *absence of resources* that sustain us. And they defeat us precisely because we so often *face them on our own, relying upon our own strength and skill*.

- Nevertheless, Peter's response may surprise us: "Yet, *if you say so, I will* let down the nets." *That is the key*. It is like the earlier words of the boy Samuel, who learns to say, "Speak, Lord; for your servant is *listening*,"⁸ *Peter and his companions grow by letting go*. Luke tells us that, when they had let down the nets, "they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break."
- What John Shea helps me to see here is this ~ "*Simon must go deep inside himself*."⁹ In other words, "*he must put out into deep water*." And he must be willing to "*wait to receive*" what God will give, by once more letting down his nets for a catch. This is significant because, hitherto, the disciples have relied *upon their own* strength and *personal* resources. *Like all of us*, they have found these things to be wanting, leaving them *only to experience* the night's *absence of light*, and the *emptiness of their nets*.¹⁰
- A fascinating part of the story comes with Simon's response to the result brought about by Jesus' words. *Simon is like Isaiah in the Temple, and like others in Old Testament stories where mere mortals encounter the divine presence. Simon is overwhelmed by a sense of his own inadequacy and sinfulness*. He falls to Jesus' feet in an act of reverent submission. Yet Jesus' response to him indicates another and different purpose for the whole encounter. *Jesus wants him to rise up with courage rather than fall down in fear*. Having been *caught* by the divine Word, *Simon is now called to be a catcher of others*.¹¹ The same can be true for us.



James Tissot, *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes*

Isaiah 6:1-8 [9-13]

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory."

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!" [And he said, "Go and say to this people:

'Keep listening, but do not comprehend;
keep looking, but do not understand.'

Make the mind of this people dull,
and stop their ears,
and shut their eyes,

so that they may not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,

and comprehend with their minds,
and turn and be healed."

Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" And he said:

"Until cities lie waste without inhabitant,
and houses without people,
and the land is utterly desolate;
until the Lord sends everyone far away,
and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.

Even if a tenth part remain in it,
it will be burned again,

like a terebinth or an oak
whose stump remains standing
when it is felled."

The holy seed is its stump.]

Luke 5:1-11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret,¹² and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Notes:

¹ See John Shea, *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers: Luke, Year C, The Relentless Widow* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2006), p. 37-39. I wish to acknowledge my particular dependence upon this source for this homily.

² Shea, p. 37.

³ Shea, p. 37 for this quote and the preceding insights.

⁴ See, for example, the Wikipedia article, "Ichthys" ~ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ichthys>

⁵ Portions of Exodus 15 as quoted in Canticle 8, "The Song of Moses," BCP:85.

⁶ Shea, p. 37.

⁷ Shea, p.37.

⁸ See 1 Samuel 3:7-11.

⁹ Shea, p. 38, for this and the following.

¹⁰ Shea, p. 38.

¹¹ Once again, this insight comes from Shea; see p. 39.

¹² Also known as the Sea of Galilee.