

SERMON

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I only have one good fishing story. I shared it last year, so I can't give you a good story for this Gospel reading. I'm sorry if you missed it or don't remember it...I'm sure I'll repeat it at some point because...I only have one good fishing story.

I looked back at that sermon to see what the text was, and it was Luke's version of this story...kind of. There are differences, but it was essentially the story of Jesus encountering the disciples and calling them away from their nets, calling them to a life of discipleship instead. Last year, I made the point that this isn't a fishing story, it's about following. It's about the call to discipleship.

It's still not a fishing story. It's still a story about the first disciples and their willingness to drop everything "immediately" to follow a wandering rabbi they barely knew.

Are we willing to do the same?

We can claim to know more about the path that Jesus will follow, but we are often as unsure as these first disciples about where that path will lead us. But the call remains.

Are we willing to follow?

Jesus begins his public ministry – after being baptized to fulfill all righteousness, after being tempted in the wilderness for 40 days and nights, after John had been arrested and imprisoned by Herod – Jesus is ready to proclaim what he had been sent to proclaim. That proclamation is an echo of what John had said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

That claim, that the kingdom of heaven has come near, is one of revolution. Not the type of revolution that the first hearers may have been expecting. Living, as they seemingly always were, under occupation and oppression, they were desperate to overthrow Rome, but that isn't exactly what Jesus meant in the good news he brought.

The good news that began in Capernaum, in Galilee, in the land of Napthali and Zebulon was revolutionary in a way that none of the first hearers expected or understood. It wasn't based on earthly power, but was the dawn of a new kingdom. Repent, transform your life because God is about to transform the world.

And those who followed Jesus would witness it. Those who encountered Jesus on the way would be transformed by it. Those who got caught up in what was happening would be...hooked by the good news, by the story of love embodied in Jesus the Messiah.

Now about that fishing – that isn’t. I’m very aware of the way that has been interpreted, not unfaithfully or wrongly, as a metaphor for evangelism. I’m sure I have said as much in previous sermons.

Entire mission statements, evangelism programs, theological treatises have been created to compare what we do as present day disciples to the phrase that Jesus coins, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” Except he didn’t “coin” it. Or at least, he wasn’t the first to say something like that within this community of God’s people.

In the Gospel that repeatedly pulls Jesus’ story into the greater story of the people of Israel, it is worthwhile to pay attention to how this concept of people-fishing might have been used. Remember, that Jesus was born into, and part of, a specific faith tradition. He was fulfilling the covenant that began centuries before in the lives and promises of the great fathers of the Jewish people – Abraham, Jacob, and Moses.

In the writings of their faith, of which we can safely assume Jesus was aware since he preached on them, the prophets also spoke about fishing for people. Amos condemned the rich by saying, “The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness: The time is surely coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks.”

Jeremiah spoke of Israel’s condemnation by saying, “I am now sending for many fishermen, says the LORD, and they shall catch them; and afterward I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain and every hill, and out of the clefts of the rocks.”

Ezekial judged the powerful by proclaiming, “Thus says the Lord GOD: I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt...I will put hooks in your jaws, and make the fish of your channels stick to your scales. I will draw you up from your channels...”

That doesn’t sound like good news. That sounds like being caught wasn’t so good. That sounds like God speaking words of accusation to those who were in power over God’s people. So, what if, what if the metaphor we’ve always turned this into isn’t what Jesus had in mind at all?

Yes, he calls the disciples to follow. Yes, he calls them to be fishers of people, but what if **it was to be the ones** who would challenge the powerful? What if we aren’t supposed to be so focused on catching new disciples in nets...which doesn’t really lead to a good outcome for the caught? What if instead, we’re supposed to be speaking God’s truth to the ones who lord their own power over others?

The proclamation of the kingdom, the good news that Jesus traveled around the region proclaiming, was good news for the weak and hungry, the sick and lame, the outcast and the oppressed. They didn't need to be caught in a net, *they already were*. They needed to be set free from the net casters.

I might not be any good at fishing, but it sounds like I've been called to follow someone who wants me to keep proclaiming good news for those who are struggling. I think I'm supposed to keep calling out those who misuse their power for their own benefit instead of caring for their neighbor.

I think we, as followers of this Jesus are supposed to use God's love and grace to proclaim the kingdom of heaven. We can do that. We have to do that. Because we are called to follow. And Jesus leads us to a cross. Amen.