

Epiphany 5C 2010
Texts: Isaiah 6:1-8 (9-13)
Psalm 138
1 Corinthians 15:1-11
Luke 5: 1-11

“Put our into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Luke 5: 4

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and redeemer. Amen

We are winding down the Epiphany season. Next Sunday is the last Sunday of this liturgical season and Lent begins in a mere 10 days. I find that really hard to believe.

The Epiphany season celebrates God’s manifestation to the world in the person of Jesus Christ. During the Epiphany season we listen to stories that show God’s power in the world. We hear of healings and exorcisms and of miracles that point to God’s abundant blessings, such as the wedding at Cana and today’s miracle of the overflowing nets of fish.

But we put the emphasis on the wrong syllable as the old saying goes, if we concentrate on the miracle and not on the message behind it. Miracles are not done to dazzle and amaze us. They aren’t done to show off some type of magic or slight of hand. Miracles always point the way to something greater than the miracle itself.

In today’s gospel reading we hear that Jesus, whose ministry was getting to be very well known, is by the lake of Gennesaret, which is the Sea of Galilee. People in the region have heard about this man traveling and healing those with sickness and demons.

A large crowd has gathered to hear Jesus teach. They are “pressing in on him.” They were literally hungry to hear the word of God proclaimed.

Around the lake of Gennesaret are steep inlets that form natural amphitheatres. The people were in this area and it would have been very natural for Jesus to ask to be put out into the shallow water so that

he could address the crowd. He could have spoken in his natural voice and be heard quite well by all that were there.

After teaching the crowd he asks Simon Peter to go out into the deep water and to let the nets down once more for a catch. I can just see Simon Peter's huge sigh, "Master, we have been out all night. We have caught nothing."

I can just sense how tired Simon Peter and the other fisherman were after a long night on the lake with nothing to show for it. I can just see them saying to each other, "let's just cut our losses, clean up and go home for a good meal and a good sleep. We'll come back tomorrow."

These were professional fisherman. They knew that lake like the back of their hand. They knew that the best time to catch anything was at night and not in the heat of the day. Yet Jesus was telling them to go back to fish not when the fishing was supposed to be good, but when the timing was actually the worst of the day.

But despite how tired and frustrated they might have been, Simon Peter, who is the spokesman for the group, then says to Jesus, "Yet, if you say so, I will let down the nets." They take the boats out into the deep water, put down their nets and take in a haul that just about sinks their boats it is so large.

Simon Peter's response to this amazing catch isn't, "I can't believe it! Look at this! We're rich now friends! Yee Ha!" It wasn't even confusion or scratching his head thinking, "Now how did this happen?" His response to the miracle was one of awe and realization that as good a fisherman as he was, he wasn't anything compared to the man standing in front of him. Simon Peter comes right up against his inadequacy in the presence of God.

Jesus then tells him, "Don't be afraid. Today you caught fish, tomorrow you will catch people." And then (and I think this could be the real miracle) they all left the best catch of their lives and followed Jesus.

The miracle wasn't that they caught the fish to begin with; it was that they gave the catch up and responded to Jesus' call on their life.

The irony in Luke's gospel passage was that the fishermen were fish themselves, and they were caught by Jesus.

When you concentrate on this call and response story, rather than on the miraculous catch, several background messages become more obvious. The first message being that this story of being called happens during a regular workday. Simon Peter and his friends were just doing what they knew in order to make a living and support their families.

This day didn't start out as anything special and yet God broke into it and made it a day that changed their lives forever.

Each day has the same potential for us. Each day we should ask ourselves, "When is God going to show up today? Will I recognize the signs that God is in my midst?" God very often shows up not in the miraculous, but in the mundane, not in the extraordinary but in the ordinary coming and goings of our lives.

When the crowds are pressing in, when we are afraid we will be overwhelmed by the needs and hunger of our families and the world, when we have worked and worked and seen nothing for our efforts, God makes his presence known in some very unusual ways with the most unlikely of people.

The second message is that in those overwhelming and frustrating times, in those days when we are so tired of trying that all we want to do is go back to bed, Jesus tells us that we are to press on, that we are to go deeper, that we are to let down our nets of vulnerability and in trusting in God's power and not our own, the miraculous will happen.

We are told time and time again that with God all things are possible. But we act as if we don't believe it. We, by ourselves, can accomplish little, but when we choose to follow Jesus we cease to be by ourselves. We are acting not under our own power, but under his power. God really does show up, everyday. God really does empower his people to do his work.

My history professor in seminary was fond of saying; “the grace of God makes fruitful work possible, transforming abasement into confidence and amazement into action.”¹

Simon Peter and his friends didn’t believe they would catch anything that morning. It would be fair to say that they were skeptical at best. But Simon Peter didn’t argue with Jesus about the wisdom of such an act, he simply said, “If you say so Lord, I will do it.”

The third message of this reading is that when we are skeptical, when we don’t think the timing is right, when what God is asking of us doesn’t make sense, we are to go deeper; we are to push off our shoreline of comfort and enter into colder, harder waters. That is where we will find those who need the word of God in order to transform their lives, and it is there that we will find our lives transformed as well.

As long as we only hug the shallow waters, as long as we insist on safety rather than service, as long as we insist on sailing into protected waters rather than open water, we will run aground.

We need to ask ourselves which act is really riskier. Is it sailing in open water or is it hugging what is believed to be a safe shoreline and wrecking ourselves on the shoals of comfort and security? That is a question well worth our pondering.

Simon Peter had to act on Jesus’ request in order to experience the miracle of that catch. He had to go deeper in order to become whom Jesus knew and wanted him to be. This would not have happened without Jesus’ invitation, and it could not have happened without Simon Peter’s action. “If you say so Lord, I will do it.”

We are all invited to get into the boat. We are all invited to push off the shore and go into waters that we are unsure of, but that will yield blessings beyond our imagining. We are all invited to let down our nets and be open to the work that God has for us in the world. And we will do it all together.

¹ Donald S. Armentrout in Synthesis, Epiphany 5, Vol. 23 #2 2010

Perhaps our slogan here at St. Matthew's should be, "If you say so Lord, we will do it."

So come on, let's go fishing.

Amen.