



“You’re Invited”

Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11

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Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

I want to tell you a fish story. It’s a true story. I’ve told this story to some of you but it bears repeating because it’s true.

When our first son was about five years old, I took him fishing. We went to the Skagit River in western Washington State where Gloria’s uncle lived at the time. The cutthroat trout were running in the Skagit. The salmon run was in full swing too. King Salmon are trophy fish – up to 50 pounds - but salmon don’t eat when they head upstream to spawn which makes them very difficult to catch. Trout, however, are always hungry though unpredictable and, therefore, not easy to catch.

Uncle Homer took us to a fishing hole where he’d caught cutthroat. It was a bend in the river where the current scoured out a nice hole where fish gathered to feed and make up their minds to move on up stream.

It is a beautiful spot, tranquil and shady. We were alone except for a fisherman in a boat anchored in midstream. Homer and I rigged our expensive fishing gear with the latest lures. Son David fished with a seven-dollar Zebco rod baited with night crawlers. He would bottom fish for suckers while we adults went after the trout.

Homer and I got nothing – not even a bite. David was pulling in one sucker after another. Cutthroat are like that, Homer kept explaining, you never know when they will start to feed.

The quiet peace of the riverside was broken by the sudden “zing” of David’s line leaving his reel at an astonishing rate. His pole was bent nearly in two. He hung on for dear life. He’d hooked something big, and it was on the move.

About that time, the fish on the line leaped and twisted trying to get rid of the hook. It was huge – a King Salmon it appeared. The man in the boat stood straight up and yelled something – I think “It’s a king.” I ran to grab David’s rod before he lost it or was pulled into the river. An odd thought crossed my mind. If we got the salmon to shore what would I do, tackle it and roll onto the shore?

About then, the line snapped – it was five pound test line – and the adventure was over. The man in the boat continued yelling and waving. “At least a 50 pounder,” he shouted. On shore, Homer and I began jabbering like idiots. Filled with awe and wonder, we couldn’t get over this marvelous adventure. And we knew people wouldn’t believe us. By the way, the guy in the boat went back to the hole for two days hoping to catch the “big one.”

Plymouth Church
Sermon 7 February 2010

The Gospel Lesson today is a fish story, some think a fantastic fish story. And because the story is fantastic, some are tempted to jump to conclusions, and consequently ask the wrong questions of the story. It's easy to miss the point of the biblical stories.

Martin Copenhaver is a graduate of Yale Divinity School. His first days as a theology student were difficult and disillusioning. Professors who'd studied in their field for decades dumped large critical theories about the Bible and a new language of discourse on students who could barely remember Sunday School. He wrestled with his faith.

A story circulated in the student body that helped. It seems several faculty members of the seminary were discussing the story of the feeding of the 5,000. One wondered how the story was shaped into its canonical form. Another applied the rigors of historical research to the story wondering what "real" event lay behind the present form of the story. Another dismissed the story altogether as an invention of the early church.

Paul Holmer, a long time professor of theology, was uncharacteristically quiet. Someone asked him what he thought. "Well," he said, "I don't know about all that stuff you've been discussing. I was just thinking that if Jesus could feed all those people, perhaps he'll feed me!"

Luke tells this story to make a point, and it's not about fish. The fish, the entire story, point at something larger, something that will, in fact, feed our souls – perhaps, change our lives. We have to let the story have its way with us.

Early in Jesus' ministry his popularity as a preacher, teacher, and healer was growing – and the crowd who followed him and listened to him grew, too. He traveled from village to village preaching in synagogues and teaching in open air meetings.

One day, he was teaching on the shore of Sea of Galilee in the city of Capernaum. A large crowd gathered to hear him. They pressed in closer and closer so they wouldn't miss a word. Jesus noticed that nearby, Simon, also known as Peter, along with his partners was cleaning his nets after a night of fishing. Fish was a staple of the diet back then, and fishing was a good business. The main catch was a large pan fish that gathers in large schools. If you ever visit Israel and the Sea of Galilee, you will likely eat one of them. It's called St. Peter's Fish, after this story.

Jesus knew Simon. He'd recently healed his mother-in-law. Jesus called out to Simon and asked if he could borrow one of his boats. (If Peter's boats were like first century boat recently discovered near the Sea of Galilee, it was about 27 feet long, 8 feet wide and 5 feet deep.) Peter said sure, and left the net cleaning to the crew. Jesus boarded the boat, and Peter rowed out from shore a bit. Jesus sat down in the boat and continued teaching the crowd.

He talked about God and how God was beginning something new and powerful in the human family. He invited them to believe it and enter into God's new creation on earth and in people.

When Jesus finished teaching, he asked Simon to take the boat out into the deep to go fishing. Simon was tired. He'd fished all night and caught nothing. He just wanted to go home. Jesus persisted. "I know a great fishing hole. I'll show you," he said. Against his better judgment, Simon relented. "Only because it's you," he said.

He rowed out into the deep water and let down his nets. Well, he'd run into a huge school of fish. He called to his partners to bring another boat. They filled both boats until the fish spilled over the sides.

We don't know how Simon Peter connected the dots of his brief acquaintance with Jesus. What we do know is that suddenly it dawned on him that he was in the presence of someone unique and compelling. It seems everywhere Jesus went, that's the effect he had on people. Somehow, in him, God's presence and power were palpable. In him women, men

Plymouth Church
Sermon 7 February 2010

and children experienced the presence of eternity. “Maybe, Simon thought, “he can feed me.”

Peter fell on his face – in the fish, mind you – and cried out, “I am not worthy to be in your presence, Lord.” In the biblical narrative, that is the response humans have when confronted with eternity.

Significantly, for our story and for faith, Jesus didn’t leave Simon lying on his face in awe. “Get up Simon,” he said. “I have work for you to do. From now on you will catch people, not fish.”

God’s kingdom, according to Jesus, is like those overflowing nets and boats. It is a place of abundance, and God wants to invite everyone to be part of it. “Go get some more people, Simon!”

Simon and his partners, stunned by that gracious invitation to be part of God’s new creation, left their boats and their nets and followed Jesus. The world has never been the same.

Christian faith is centered in and based on a vision of the glory of God. Such a vision stuns and transforms people of faith – and changes the world. The Old Testament Lesson, like the story of Simon and the fish, is an account of an ordinary human confronted with the glory of God. Isaiah uses the language of metaphor and mystery to attempt to explain what words cannot contain.

“Seeing” God, by all accounts, is a soul-shaking and life-changing experience. Most of the time we manage to keep God at arm’s distance. We’ve created God in our own image, a God who demands little and tends to agree with us at all times.

The God of the Bible will have none of that. Simon learned that in a wonderful way. Confronted with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, Simon got up and followed Jesus. Neither he nor the world has ever been the same. In a few chapters, Luke tells of the time Jesus walked into the office of a tax collector named Levi. He simply said, “Follow me,” and Levi got up and followed him into a new life and unknown future. We don’t know the circumstances, but Mary Magdalene met Jesus and was utterly transformed. The gospels tell us she was a terribly disturbed woman, possessed by multiple demons. Jesus made her whole, she followed him – and we’re talking about her 2,000 years later.

Clearly from all accounts, to meet Jesus was to be in the presence of eternity. St. Paul puts it simply and profoundly, “God was in Christ reconciling the world....”

Christian faith is submitting to a Lord and following him. Back in the late 60’s, there was a popular pin worn by younger Christians. Its message was direct, “not religion, a relationship.” Faith in Jesus Christ is a matter of love, trust, dependence, and obedience. It is attachment to a person, not affiliation with an institution or contemplation of an idea.

There is more to the story, of course. Christian salvation, following Jesus, is not about us! Jesus enlisted Simon, Levi, and Mary into the very work of God on earth. The world needed – and needs – saving. In a grace beyond comprehension, God is determined to use us to redeem God’s dearly loved planet.

The beauty of faith is that whoever we are and wherever we are and whatever we do, God wants to use us and our lives to accomplish God’s will in the world. We pray “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth,” and believe it or not, God means it. And God means us!

The only question is: would you believe? Amen