

Into the Deep

Isaiah 6:1-13; Luke 5:1-11

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, (Feb. 10) 2019

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Jesus was beside the Sea of Galilee teaching. The crowd was so interested in what he had to say that it had him pressed against the water's edge. He saw a couple of fishing boats tied up to the shore while their fishermen washed their nets and worked on their equipment. Jesus got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon and asked Simon to push the boat out into the water. Then Jesus sat in the boat and continued teaching the crowd of people.

Jesus finished and said to Simon, "Go out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."

If Jesus said to you, "Go out into the deeper water." Or, "Come, follow me." How many of you might respond, "Why?" When we're honest, there are many of us who prefer a bit more explanation when we are asked to do something and we have no idea of what we're getting into or what the results will be. "Jesus, why do you want us to go out into the deeper water? We'd like to know where we're going and what we can expect. Jesus, how much time is this going to take? Let's talk about our expectations – what you expect and what I expect and let's make sure we're on the same page. It's not our habit to go out into the deep without explanation."

Right off, Jesus calls these disciples to a project without known results. Think about that. Could you answer that call?

But we're just getting started. Jesus says, "Let down your nets for a catch." And Simon might have responded, "Hold it, Jesus, we're fishermen. We've been doing this for our entire lives. Our fathers were fishermen and our grandfathers were fishermen. We live not 100 feet from the water's edge. We've already been fishing all day and didn't catch a thing, which is why we were tied up on shore mending our nets and putting our gear away."

Simon was wondering about this teacher. Obviously he is a great teacher but what does he know about fishing? Maybe he asked him about his background. "You're from Nazareth? What'd you do over there? Carpenter. I see... but you're telling us to go out into the deep and let our nets down again."

I wonder. What made Simon obey Jesus? What made him go out into the deep? Later, toward the end of Luke, after the Resurrection, in Emmaus, some of the disciples walk with the Resurrected Jesus and do not recognize him until after they show hospitality to him and invite him in and share their meal with him. Then Jesus disappears. And they say, "Did not our hearts burn within us when he taught us and walked along the way with us?" I wonder if here, for Simon and the rest of these fishermen who will become disciples, for the first time, their hearts were burning inside of them? Was their heart telling them something they do not yet recognize but telling them something nonetheless about this strange and powerful teacher? Perhaps they thought, "My head tells me I know more about fishing than this carpenter but my heart tells me to trust him. Something tells me to go out into the deep."

So out they go – into the deep. Some of the fishermen probably grumbled or

looked out of the side of their eyes at one another, but Simon is the boss and he says to Jesus, “If you say so....” And they row out into the deep water and let down their nets. In no time, they catch such a load of fish that the first boat is almost swamped. The second boat comes over and helps but it is all both crews can do to drag the full nets of fish to shore.

This is where the church across the centuries loves to pause in the retelling of this story. The church loves to pause right after verse 7. The church laughs and punches each other every time we hear about the gigantic haul of fish Simon and the rest caught that day. Someone usually says, “You know it always makes good sense to listen to what Jesus has to say.” Everyone laughs some more and someone chimes in, “Well, isn’t that what we are always supposed to do? Listen to Jesus?” And they repeat the sacred story, “If you say so...”

The church likes to pause after verse 7 because the church knows a lot about failure. We know what it is like to fish all night and have only empty nets – failure. We know the frustration of working long hours with no satisfaction at the end. “My heavens, I have been working with these kids for years and no one has ever said, ‘Thanks.’” Or, “We’ve been inviting people to Austin Heights for years and rarely does anyone stick around, so why should I try again?” “I’ve tried church; it didn’t work then and it won’t work now.” “Pray? Why bounce my words off of the ceiling? I prayed years ago and it didn’t do any good so I’ve given it up.” “I’ve stuck my hand out there and had it slapped too many times: I’m not sticking it out there anymore.” “Master, we’ve worked all night long and we’ve caught nothing. We’ve already tried this. My heavens, Mister Jesus, how many times are you going to make us row out there?”

But we re-hear this story and we pause. We smile. And we remind ourselves about listening to the Word of God, of listening to what Jesus says. “Look at what happens! Their nets were overflowing! So many fish that both boats were nearly swamped!” And everyone laughs!

But you know and I know that this old story does not end at verse 7. In fact, the first word of verse 8 is “But.” “But when Simon saw it, he fell down at Jesus knees, saying, ‘Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!’” And the verses go on to explain that everyone there on that day were amazed and shocked at what had happened.”

Someone says, “You know there is more to this story.” And everyone gets quiet; a few heads nod around the room. Yes, we all know there is more to this story. Simon falls down at Jesus’s feet crying for Jesus to go away and everyone is shocked over what happened.

Why? Why did Simon fall down and say, “Get away from me, Jesus. I’m a sinful man!”? My first thought is that Simon would have been jumping with joy. Think about it, Simon is in the fishing business and for the first time he has found someone who can help him catch more fish than he could imagine.

Why this, “Get away from me, Jesus. I’m a sinful man!”?

If we don’t know why Simon Peter said, “Get away from me, Jesus,” then we don’t know about the dangers of fishing with Jesus. We don’t understand the risk of going out into the deep with Jesus.

Let's be honest, we know how to handle fishing failure. We don't like to fish all night and not even get a nibble but at least we know what to do about it. We know about being church all day with nothing to show for it. That's why most of us know more about Good Friday and the Cross than we do Easter and the Resurrection. Life is hard and we have come to expect failures and dreams that never worked out. We have become accustomed to church where we just get by. We know how to lose elections but rarely win one. We know how to talk to small groups but not to large ones. We know how to just get by but not how to be successful. We know how to walk with Jesus to the Cross but after that, we're out of here. Resurrection? Easter? What's that? Over the years, our expectations of church have gotten lower; our hope in God has gotten smaller. C. S. Lewis said, "It is not that we desire too much, but that we want too little. We no longer long to be saved; we only want to feel a bit better. We no longer expect a new world; we only hope to be better adjusted to the present world" (*The Weight of Glory*).

Henri Nouwen, the late Catholic priest and writer said that when it came time to pray he found he always had other things to do, phone calls needing to be made, and appointments to keep. Anything to keep him distracted from going into the deep with Jesus – which is what prayer is. Prayer takes us into the deepest places in our own hearts, which is where both deep joy and deep grief reside. And prayer invites God into those deepest places. Prayer is hard work. It takes time, and attention and discipline and it can be painful. We would rather find anything to keep us busy so we won't go there. We prefer to stay in the shallows.

In our Old Testament reading the prophet Isaiah is in worship in the Temple and finds himself in the very presence of the Most Holy God. His first response to being in God's presence is, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips,

yet my eyes have seen the Lord of Hosts!” (Isaiah 6:5).

When we find ourselves in the presence of God, it is more than we can handle. “Woe is me! Get away from me!”

In verse 5 Simon calls Jesus, “Master” which was the term of respect for a rabbi or teacher. But in verse 8, after going into the deep and catching all the fish, Simon changes from “Master” to “Lord.” “Get away from me, Lord! Catching all those fish was great. But Jesus, there is much more going on here that I can handle. My heart told me to trust you but my heart also tells me that you will change me and I don’t know if I’m ready for that right now. Get away from me, Lord!”

It is easy for us to play around in the shallow water. We check our phones, catch a few small fish every now and then and hold them up for everyone else to see, and check our phones again. Jesus shows up and we respond, “Jesus, I’m too busy... Can I follow you today? No, I’ve another appointment at 3:00 and I’ve a meeting at 5:30. Tomorrow? No, I’m out of town. I hope to see you for an hour next Sunday... maybe. Text me next week, Jesus and we’ll see if we can set something up.”

Jesus says, “Put out into the deep, let down your nets. Don’t be afraid. From now on, I’ll teach you to catch people.

Can we stand going out into the deep with Jesus? One of the reasons so many are afraid of counseling and therapy is that we know that it might take us into waters deeper than we like. It is very frightening. And worst of all, we might have to change!

It's the deep waters of God's unmanageable, mysterious, powerful grace that scares us, makes us want to cry, "Get out of here, Jesus! I was doing fine before you came along. I'm busy, but I'm in my comfort zone."

In C.S. Lewis' Narnia book, *The Last Battle*, one of the characters shouts, "I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now...Come further up, come further in!"

Going into the deep is the invitation to come further up and further in. To come home at last and discover where you have always meant to be. This morning, I want to challenge you to go into the deep with Jesus and Jesus' disciples. Listen to your heart. Quit listening to your calendar. Quit being distracted. What might it look like for you to go deeper? You younger adults, what might it look like for you to go deeper? There is an old saying from the Civil Rights Movement that says, "If not me, who? If not now, when?" What if that old saying is about you?

At the top of our Order of Service, just under our Austin Heights Baptist Church logo is the tag line, "Gathered by Grace, Growing in Love, Empowered to Serve," which is a short version of the opening line of our church covenant. We see it every Sunday and take it for granted; in fact, we probably many of us do not even see it anymore. But there it is... Gathered by grace.

We're all here because God gathered us. God in Christ caught us by grace – grace that is unmanageable, mysterious, and powerful. When you're caught by grace your heart will burn. You want to cry. You want Jesus to leave but you want

him to stay. And you know that if you stay with Jesus and go deeper with Jesus, your life will not be the same.

Jesus says to you “Don’t be afraid. I’m calling you. I’m catching you. Come on, join up.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.

On one of the islands the crew lands on, Eustace finds a dragon's lair and is very greedy for the treasure. He puts on a gold bracelet and falls asleep, and when he wakes up, he has been turned into a dragon. Lewis writes, "Sleeping on a dragon's hoard with greedy, dragonish thoughts in his heart, he had become a dragon himself." Eustace had fleeting thoughts of relief at being the biggest thing around, but he quickly realizes he is cut off from his friends, and all of humanity, and he feels a weight of loneliness and desperately wants to change.

That night, Aslan comes to Eustace and leads him to a large well "like a very big round bath with marble steps going down into it." Eustace describes the scene to Edmund after the fact. He says the water was so clear and he thought if he could get in there and bathe it would ease the pain in his leg (from the gold bracelet he had put on when he was human). But Aslan told him he had to undress first.

"Then the lion said - but I don't know if it spoke - 'You will have to let me undress you.' I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it."

"The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off..."

"Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off ... And there was I as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me - I didn't like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I'd no skin on - and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it

became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain had gone from my arm. And then I saw why. I'd turned into a boy again..."

Lewis add this note of narration at the end of this scene:

"It would be nice, and fairly nearly true, to say that "from that time forth Eustace was a different boy." To be strictly accurate, he began to be a different boy. He had relapses. There were still many days when he could be very tiresome. But most of those I shall not notice. The cure had begun."

- C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*