

Luke 5:1-11

“Into the Deep”

September 5, 2021

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Ordinary Time

The last time our congregation gathered in one worship service on the Lord’s Day was March 8, 2020, almost exactly a year a half ago to the day. On March 8, 2020, none of us could have imagined what the next 18 months would bring. None of us saw it coming. I certainly didn’t.

As we gather again today, and I get to preach to you all at once for the first time in a very long time, I want to use this morning to look at God’s word and speak to how I believe this passage in Luke 5 speaks to what I believe the Lord is doing in our midst during this strange season - in our personal lives as individuals, in the lives of our families, and in our church as a whole.

So let’s listen this morning once more to God’s holy and inerrant word from Luke 5:1-11, which is printed for you on the back of your order of worship if you’d like to read along.

*5 On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, 2 and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. 3 Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon’s, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. 4 And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” 5 And Simon answered, “Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.” 6 And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. 7 They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink.*

*8 But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." 9 For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, 10 and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men." 11 And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

Prayer...

As we begin this morning, I want to spend a few minutes talking about the last 18 months since March 2020 and what they have meant for us as a church.

As I sit in the living rooms of your homes and listen to what you tell me or meet you for lunches or you sit across my dining table after Sunday lunches or as you sit on the couch in my office and speak, the stories I hear about the past 18 months are mostly difficult ones.

I want to you to hear me say this clearly. If you have had a hard time these past 18 months emotionally, spiritually, or physically, then you are not alone. You are surrounded by a community full of people that have experienced these things as well.

As I've listened to you describe for me your experience of the last 18 months, I hear a lot of words like these: loneliness, exhaustion, anxiety, depression, sadness, fear, anger, frustration, isolation, grief. And underneath it all, a a sense of powerlessness and malaise.

Many of you have described conflict with extended family and even close friends over the past 18 months, as well as sadness over lost opportunities for yourselves or your children.

I've heard stories of marriages under new forms of pressure and tension, of falling into unhealthy family and personal rhythms, of financial difficulty.

If you have had an easy 18 months, then I would say - hey, that's great, thank God. But I can also say pretty confidently that your experience has been unusual, at least as far as this community is concerned.

But, of course, I have not only heard you speak with me of negative experiences over the last 18 months. I've heard so many good things as well - and often good fruit that has been growing right in the midst of the all the hard stuff.

I've heard many of you speak to me of a new commitment to a life of prayer, and how precious the psalms have become to you during this time - and this has been matched by our church's ministry, as our morning prayer meetings have grown from one day a week to three days a week ever since March 2020, and these prayer meetings attracted a number of new participants.

I've heard you speak to me about how you're asking new questions about your lives - how you're re-evaluating what is most important to you, and how you have become more willing to take risks and to push for new growth and change in your own personal lives, in your marriages, and in your relationships with others.

I've also seen a hunger for God's word - I've received more persistent and positive feedback from you in response to my preaching over the last 18 months than I have at any point in my ministerial experience - I can tell that the Lord is giving you a new hunger for his word, and a growing sense of your dependence on hearing from him.

I've also heard stories and watched you learn to serve one another and your neighbors in new ways.

I've watched many of you take risks to reach out and serve those in need - bringing a meal, visiting a lonely friend, calling up those who are grieving and discouraged.

I also want you to know that one of the most positive things I've witnessed since March 2020 has been the work of our deacons, which often goes on behind the scenes.

Over the last 18 months, I'm confident that our deacons have both received and distributed more funds to those in need in our church and our community than they did in the previous five years combined. It's been beautiful to see the way in which you have contributed your resources to care for one another and for your neighbors.

Since March 2020, I've often used the language of an apocalypse to describe our experience as individuals and as a church. Not "apocalypse" in the sense of this being the end of days, but an "apocalypse" in the original meaning of the Greek word - that it has been a kind of unveiling, a stripping away, an unmasking of who we actually are.

I know that this unveiling, this apocalypse, has been deeply uncomfortable at times. It has been an incredibly uncomfortable 18 months for me, for a million reasons.

But I also want you to know that I believe that none of this discomfort and instability is happening to us by accident - this Jesus is doing this on purpose for us, and in fact, this is exactly the kind of thing Jesus does - lead those whom he loves into new places of discomfort and instability so that he can transform them and make them new.

And in fact, that's exactly what we see in our passage from Luke this morning.

Our passage this morning begins with a pretty straightforward problem - Jesus is teaching the people by the Sea of Galilee (called "the Lake of Gennesaret" here, but it's the same thing), and there are too many people and not enough room.

Jesus' notoriety is growing — he's been healing the sick and casting out demons and preaching in the synagogues — although not everyone is happy about what he's up to - just a few verses ago in chapter 4, Jesus' childhood friends in Nazareth literally tried to kill him after one of his sermons.

In any case, Jesus is preaching there by the Sea of Galilee one morning, and the people are all around him and there isn't much space, and they can't hear him very well, and then he looks over and sees two fishing boats beached up on the shore.

The boats were empty, they weren't being used. The fishermen were nearby washing their linen fishing nets after a long night of labor. They were probably a bit grumpy, because as we'll find out in a minute, they hadn't caught anything all night, and this was their livelihood.

The reason these fishermen had fished all night and were washing their nets now in the daylight is because the type of fishing nets used in Israel at this time were made of linen, which meant that the fish could see the nets during the daytime and avoid them and it was pretty much only possible to trap them at night when it was dark.

Well, in any case, Jesus sees the boats just sitting there, and he does this really interesting thing. He just goes and sits in one.

He doesn't ask permission, he just goes and sits in it. And then, after Jesus gets into the empty boat, he shouts out to ask Simon, who happens to own this boat, to come over and take him out a little way from shore.

Jesus wants to do this, of course, to solve his current dilemma with the crowd. If he goes out a little bit from the shore on a boat the people won't be able to press up against him and his voice will be amplified by bouncing off the water so that they can hear him preach. He basically wants to use Simon's fishing boat as an ancient sound system.

It's a little bit of an awkward situation for Simon. He runs a fishing business, not a preaching business, he's been working all night and he's in the middle of washing his nets and probably ready to eat something for breakfast and then go to bed, but now he's been put on the spot by Jesus in front of all these people, so what can he do, really?

Simon shrugs his shoulders, gets back in the boat and pilots his vessel a little way from shore so that Jesus can use it as his personal pulpit.

I want to stop here for a minute and just point out something. Notice the sequence of events here. The first thing Jesus does is just get into the boat. Just as if *he* owned it, not Simon.

Jesus doesn't ask permission, he just does it. And then, after he's already in the boat, then he asks Simon in a pretty public and socially uncomfortable way to get on board with his plan which is the opposite of what Simon's plan had been up until that moment for his day.

There's a lot of talk about boundaries in our society today. And I get. I appreciate boundaries. I think they can be important as we think about relating to others in wise and mature ways.

But I want you to see here, beloved, is that Jesus does not respect boundaries.

No, if you follow Jesus, and possibly even if you try *not* to follow Jesus, he will intrude into your life. This thing that he does with Simon in this passage is exactly the kind of thing he will do with you.

You will be happily minding your own business, moving right along with your preferred plan for your life, and then Jesus will show up.

And he will put you in an uncomfortable place that isn't what you had planned, and he will do it without asking whether or not you wanted it to happen.

In fact, I would argue that is exactly what he has been doing in your life and the life of our church and the life of our world for the past 18 months. It is precisely the kind of thing Jesus makes a habit of doing. He just shows up and starts leading us into new places with him, usually without asking at all.

Well, the whole water and boat situation works fine, and after the sermon's over, Simon's probably thinking, "Well, that was nice, now about some food and nap," but Jesus turns to him before Simon can even start rowing the boat back to shore, almost as if Jesus had planned this out all along, and he looks Simon in the eyes and he says to him these words: *"Put out into the deep and let your nets down for a catch."*

*"Put out into the deep."* That's what Jesus says to Simon, and if those words from our Savior don't make a chill run down your spine, then I don't know what will. It's not a suggestion. It's not a request. It's a command from Jesus to Simon to leave the shoreline and go out into the deep waters with him.

And at first, Simon protests: "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing!" He's tired and hungry and confused. And he doesn't say it, but this is his business, he's the professional fisherman here, and everyone knows that linen nets don't work in the sunshine.

But then, much like Mary in chapter 1 of Luke's gospel in her response to Gabriel, after his initial protest, Simon submits to Jesus' strange and unsettling command. He says: *"But at your word I will let down the nets."*

And, it is then, beloved — *after* Jesus calls Simon out into the deep and Simon agrees to go, that strange and wondrous things begin to happen.

The boat is piloted out into the deep waters. The nets are let down. And then, unexpectedly, they begin to fill with fish.

It would be unusual for any fish at all to be caught at this time of day, but now, in the deep waters, so many fish are beginning to fill Simon's nets that they begin to tear and break.

Simon starts jumping and waving his arms, trying to get James and John's attention on the shore, because this wonderful thing, this astounding catch of fish is also kind of an emergency, and when his partners arrive with their boat they together pull up the nets and fill both boats so full of fish that the vessels actually begin to sink out there in the deep waters where Jesus has led them.

Just think about that for a moment. The boats were so full of fish that they begin to sink into the water.

And it is there, in the middle of hundreds and thousands of fish filling his sinking boat that Simon does this remarkable thing.

He drops to his feet in front of Jesus and he says, "*Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!*" It is almost too much, this thing that Jesus has done.

Simon seems to realize in this moment that he is into something far deeper than he had bargained for, that someone outside of himself who has God's own authority has intruded into his life in a way that is strange and wondrous and also deeply frightening.

But Jesus is so gentle. He looks Simon in the eye, with the fish flopping all around and the boat sinking and he says: "*Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.*"



And I'm not exactly sure what Simon thought of that. But Luke tells us, when Peter and Andrew and James and John finally got back to shore with their astounding windfall of fish they left it all behind and followed Jesus.

Now, beloved, here is my application.

This story of what Jesus did to Simon, how he showed up one day and told him to put out into the deep and transformed his life when Simon followed him there - this is a literal thing that happened in history.

But is also a picture given to us for our learning, so that we would know that this is the kind of thing that Jesus does for anyone who would follow him.

To put it bluntly, if you intend to live a Christian life this exactly the kind of thing Jesus will do for you.

You will be living your life, minding your own business, fairly satisfied with how things are going and then Jesus will appear, and he will start re-arranging things.

He will make you uncomfortable in ways you hadn't counted on, just as he has made many of us uncomfortable in these past 18 months.

And then, at some point, in the midst of all this discomfort, he will say these words to you as well, just as he said them to Simon.

Jesus will say to you: *"It is time. Put out into the deep. Come with me out to the deeper waters and find out what happens next."*

And at this point, you will have to decide how far you want to go with Jesus. How much it is you actually trust him. I don't know how to put it any more frankly than that.

Because strange and wondrous things do not happen in the shallows where things are safe and predictable and they way we like them. No, strange and wondrous things — real transformation — people being made new— happens when we put out into the deep with Jesus.

Beloved, I don't know exactly how Jesus is asking you to go out into the deep with him today. But I know that he is doing it. I know that he is asking you that question, if you will listen.

For some of you the deeper waters Jesus is asking you to enter might be in your vocation. Maybe Jesus is asking you to take a risk, to disrupt your life, trust him in your work or your studies in a way that you never before.

For some of you the deeper waters might be in your life of prayer with him. Jesus might be asking you to come and pray with him, to not fall asleep as you have done so often in the past, but to stay awake with him and commune with him in a new way as you learn, in some ways for the first time in your life, what it means to really pray.

For some of you the deeper waters might be in your marriage. Jesus might be asking you to move toward your spouse in a new way, to use your voice to speak up, to unveil your heart in an act of vulnerability and trust and create space for new intimacy, new growth with the man or woman God has given you.

For some of you the deeper waters might be in your emotions. Jesus might be asking you to stop allowing anxiety or anger or bitterness to rule your hearts, to simply give those things up and trust him — because ironically, anxiety and anger and bitterness are all different ways in which we exercise control and self-protection.

Maybe Jesus is calling you to forgive someone in a new way, to let go of a hurt you've held onto.

Maybe Jesus is asking you to stop holding onto the grudge you have held against him because of that thing he hasn't done for you yet.

Maybe Jesus is asking you to go to someone you love and admit really, fully, that you were wrong and ask their forgiveness.

For some of you the deeper waters might be for the first time doing the work necessary to understand your own heart and your own story. Sitting down with a someone else and letting them listen to your struggles and invite them to speak into your life in a way that is intimate and scary but also creates the possibility for growing in real wisdom.

Beloved, I don't know exactly the deeper waters that Jesus is inviting you to go out with him into. But I know that it is probably something that you suspect might be good for you but also feels deeply frightening at the same time.

But what I want you to see is that it is in the deep waters that Jesus will change you, just as changed Simon into Peter and began to teach him to catch men instead of fish.

The risk is an essential part of the equation. If you stay at the shoreline, you will miss what he desires for you to become.

And so I ask you - what does it mean for you today, in your life, to put out into the deep with Jesus?

And the same is true also for us as a church. Friends, I don't know exactly what the coming years hold for us as a congregation. But I know that we are not the same church we were 18 months ago. We are different now.

It has been an unprecedented time of unsettledness in our society, and that has affected our congregation as well.

More than a few who were once part of our body have reevaluated their relationship with our church and moved on. Others, who are new, have seen something attractive about what God is doing here and have come to join us.

I don't know exactly what God will do with us the months and years ahead of us.

But I suspect that he will continue to teach us new things about what it means to live a Christian life in this place, what it means to orient our lives around those ancient Christian practices of worship and prayer and hospitality and service together.

I know he has more to teach us and show us together, things we haven't yet learned.

I don't know exactly what Jesus is doing. But I know he is doing something new here in this congregation.

And I want you to hear me saying clearly, as your pastor, that I believe Jesus is asking all of us together as a church to put out into the deep with him.

To go out to where he is calling us. And that is where I intend to go. And I would love for you to come as well - whether you've been here for 30 years or for 3 weeks.

Beloved, this fall, let's put out into the deep. Let's go out to the deep waters with Jesus and see with our own eyes what strange and wondrous things he intends to do.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.