

4 February 2007
Epiphany 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“His Net, His Catch, His Church”

Text: Luke 5:1-11

(This sermon is a reprise from three years ago, with some small modifications. I do not especially like re-using sermons, but circumstances, sickness, and time led me to return to it this year. Also to benefit the many new folks that did not hear it three years ago.)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jesus leaves no doubt as to who is responsible for this miraculous catch of fish.

The Simon Peter, James and John Fishing Company had been out all night, with all their wisdom and skill, going to all the right places, using all the best techniques, and had caught . . . *nothing*. They were probably tired and grumpy and so after washing and mending their nets, just wanted to go home and catch some shut eye.

But after using Simon Peter's boat as a pulpit for a while, Jesus says, "*Guys, let's try again. Let's try in the deep water.*" Professionals don't like amateurs telling them how to do their jobs. Peter, James, and John probably all looked at each other in disbelief. *Is He serious?* It's the wrong depth of water for fishing. It's the wrong time of day for fishing. We're not going to catch anything! But since it's Jesus asking . . . Jesus, who not too long ago had healed Peter's mother-in-law from a fever, and was gaining quite a reputation around those parts. *If it had been anybody else . . .* But alright. "*Master . . . at your word I will let down the nets.*" James and John, you stay here and finish up. I'll put out and humor the *carpenter*.

So off they go. When they get to the deep water, Peter lets down the nets, probably wondering how long this is going to take, how long Jesus is going to make them sit out there . . . *when they actually begin catching fish!* And not just a few fish, an abundance of fish! Not one boatload of fish, but more than two boatloads of fish! So many fish they don't have room for them all. **And there is no doubt who is responsible.** And it's not because Jesus knew better fishing techniques. And it's not

because Jesus just knew where the fish were. It is because in this man Jesus is the Almighty God. The God who made these fish, and the God who can order these fish to swim into a net.

And so this miraculous catch of fish leaves no doubt as to who Jesus is. Peter is face to face with his Maker. He no longer calls Jesus simply "master," now He is the Lord. But Peter is not yet ready to meet his Maker, and so he falls at Jesus' knees and begs Him to leave. *"Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."* Give Peter credit – at least he got that part right.

But if Peter wasn't ready to meet his Maker, his Maker was ready for him. This miraculous catch of fish was no accident, no payment to Peter for the use of his boat as a pulpit, no simple helping out of some fishermen who had some bad luck. Unlikely as it may seem, Jesus had chosen these men to be His disciples, His followers. To teach them and train them to be His apostles, His sent ones. To send them into the world after His death, resurrection, and ascension, to be His representatives, to give His forgiveness and faith and to establish and build His Church. And so when Peter falls at Jesus' knees, confessing his sin, Jesus speaks words of grace and forgiveness: *"Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men. And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him."*

And with these words, Jesus shows us that the most miraculous catch that day wasn't the fish! And what started off as just another day, with the same old routine, and the same old work, turned out quite differently.

But that's how it is with God. You're probably not so different than Peter, James, and John. Each day you wake up and have a routine. Off to work, off to school. Take care of the house, take care of the family. Meet with friends, meet with co-workers. Take care of things. Perhaps some days it feels as if you got nothing accomplished, or if what you did that day didn't matter to anyone at all. Maybe the same old routine is growing old, and beginning to feel like a rat race. Peter, James, and John had been up fishing all night and caught nothing. It probably wasn't the first time.

And it can seem that way in the Church as well. Each week we come and go through the liturgy. You listen to the sermon, you go to Bible class. It can seem rather routine. Maybe you feel stagnant in your faith. As a church we try to reach out into

the community. We go canvassing and set up at festivals. We send mailings and invite people to come. Perhaps it feels as if we are getting nothing accomplished. Why are we doing so much fishing and catching nothing?

How do we make sense of all this? We do so by remembering who is responsible for the miraculous catch of fish. For on the one hand, Christ commands us to work, but on the other hand He shows us that our work - on our own - accomplishes nothing. Our lives, our hands, are empty without the grace and presence of God. . . . Now, the world tells us otherwise. The world would have us believe that if you work hard you will be successful. That if you make better choices you will have a better life. That if you do the right things, the right things will happen to you. But is that really so? There are some very good parents whose children have gotten mixed up in drugs, or cults, or rebellion. There are some very hard working people who get laid off every year. There are people at the top of their professions who feel empty. There are people who take very good care of their bodies who get terrible diseases. There are retirees who feel useless and unappreciated. Many people are wondering: what are we accomplishing? Where will it end? Does it matter? Or are we simply going to realize after toiling all our lives that we have come back empty-handed?

But Christ tells us to go back out. Perhaps we are tired. Perhaps we are skeptical. Perhaps we really want to catch some shut eye instead. Perhaps we wonder why. **But whose catch is it anyway?** So off we go, in the vocations that God has given us. And they're not all the same. We're not all fishermen, we're not all pastors. We're fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, workers, students, bosses, grandparents, friends, neighbors - and off we go. But as Christians we go differently. We do not go as we went before, but as those who have been caught by Christ; who have been caught in the net of His Gospel of forgiveness; who have heard His Word of grace and forgiveness and been Baptized and have feasted at His Table. And so we go differently because we are different. We go no longer on our own, depending on our works and accomplishments, our techniques and wisdom, our skill and strength - no, we go in faith, knowing that if anything is going to be accomplished through us, it is going to be done by Christ. By Christ living in us. By the One who can command fish to swim into a net.

And so as Christ re-defined what it meant for Peter, James, and John to be

fishermen, so He does the same for us in our lives, in our vocations. And we see things differently. One popular television preacher likes to say, "*If it's going to be, it's up to me.*" That's a catchy phrase, but Peter, James, and John would disagree, I think. If it's going to be, **it's up to Christ**. If it's up to you and me, we look around and see what we're able to do, and what we've done, and what we've failed to do, and all we can do is fall at Jesus' knees like Peter and admit our failure. All we can do is fall at Jesus' feet and die, because that's all we're good for anyway. *Maybe it would actually be an improvement.* But Jesus didn't leave Peter there, He didn't leave Isaiah there, and He doesn't leave us there either. No, for in our sin, in our failure, in our death, those comforting words spoken to Peter are also spoken to us: "*Do not be afraid.*" We are not condemned. Our sin is atoned for. We are forgiven. For Jesus came to join us in our sin and death, that as He is risen from the dead, so too we might be raised from our sin and death and given a new life.

And thus raised and re-born, from now on we see our vocations in a new light. Re-defined. And so we're fathers and mothers raising not just *our* children, but His children. We're workers not just working for ourselves, but providing daily bread for others. We're friends and neighbors through whom God is taking care of others. And in the church, we're canvassers, we go to festivals, we send out mailings and invite not to be successful but to let down the net of God's Word and forgiveness. But we cannot command the fish to swim into it - only Christ can do that. On our own, we can accomplish nothing. Only Christ can build His Church and His Kingdom.

Go back out. At His Word. Sometimes that's tough. But as you go, know that the work and results are His, that your life is anything but routine, anything but meaningless, and anything but accomplishing nothing. The Word of God is accomplishing in you and through you exactly what Christ wills. We may not always be able to see it, or understand it, but that's where faith comes in. That's where the cross comes in. That even in the face of sin and death, of seeming hardship and failure, to trust that when the net is pulled up, there will be fish. And not just a few, but an abundance! For just as you have been caught, others are being caught.

And it is all by grace. **Christ is doing His work.**

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

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.