

10 February 2019
The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Fishers of Men Are Preachers of Jesus”

Text: Luke 5:1-11 (Isaiah 6:1-8)

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

The last two Sundays we have heard of Jesus preaching. First it was in the synagogue in Nazareth, then the synagogue in Capernaum. Today He is preaching again, but this time is a little different. It is not in a synagogue, but by the Lake of Gennesaret (also known as the Sea of Galilee). It is not a Sabbath but a work day. And He preaches not from a reading table with a scroll of Scripture in front of Him, but today His pulpit is a boat. But the preaching is the same. That doesn't change. He preaches so that all would repent of themselves and believe in Him.

After a while, when He finished preaching, Jesus tells Simon to put out again. And not just a little, but to the deep part of the lake, and let down their nets for a catch. Really? They had *just finished* cleaning their equipment, all Simon wanted to do was go home and go to bed, it was the wrong part of the lake and the wrong part of the day . . . but okay. Because you say so. Anybody else, no way. But for the Jesus who casts out demons, healed his mother-in-law of a fever, turned water into wine, and more . . . you don't say no to Him.

And of course, you know what happened. They catch more fish than they can handle. The nets are tearing, the boats are sinking, fish are flipping and flopping all around them. There is chaos in the boats. And in the midst of it all, Peter falls down at Jesus' knees and says: ***Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.*** And maybe for Peter it wasn't just sin in general; maybe He had a particular sin in mind. Like not really believing that they were actually going to catch anything. Like thinking that Jesus might be a good preacher, but He's a really lousy fisherman. Like his anger, perhaps, at having to go out again when he knew they weren't going to catch anything and all he really wanted to do was go to bed? The weight of all that now crushing him; sinking him more than all those fishes were sinking their boats.

But Jesus doesn't do it - depart from him. He doesn't get out of the boat then and there and walk on the water to the shore. *Let 'em sink! Doubters! Ingrates! I hope they choke on the fish bones.* No. Instead, He forgives. ***Do not be afraid,*** Jesus says to his frightened friends. For not just Simon, but James and John, too, found themselves in the same place. ***From now on,*** He says, ***you will be catching men.*** They are going to be preachers. The

large catch of fish not payment for use of the boat as His pulpit, but lesson number one for Simon, James, and John: *do not doubt the power of the Word of God.*

And for the next three years, they would hear the power of that Word, as Jesus taught with authority, drove out demons, and forgave sins. They would see the power of that Word as Jesus tamed creation, quieting storms as easily as we tell a dog to sit and feeding multitudes when they didn't even have enough food to feed themselves. And then they would witness the fulfillment of that Word when the whipped, pierced, nailed, and bloody corpse of Jesus that had been laid in a tomb, rose from the dead. And didn't just rise, but rose *like new*. The holes in His hands and feet and side no longer gory, but glorified.

So that's what they would preach. Jesus, and all that He said and all that He did. All that they heard and all that they saw. And you know the first time they did? The first time Peter and the eleven stood up and preached after Jesus died and rose . . . perhaps we could say it was in the wrong place and at the wrong time, just like their fishing that day. For they were in Jerusalem, among the folks who had just forced Pilate's hand to crucify Jesus not even two months ago. But preach they did. They preached Jesus crucified and resurrected. And if they had been using nets, they certainly would have been tearing and their boats sinking, for about three thousands souls were added to the church that day (Acts 2:41).

From now on you will be catching men. They are going to be preachers. And here's the thing: because they did, because they preached, that's why you're here today. We could even be a bit stronger with that statement: Jesus chose those fishermen that day because He wanted you to believe. You, some 2,000 years later. You who are sinful men and women. You who also doubt and question and, perhaps, even get angry at God. They preached so that you would believe. Or as Paul would later write in his letter to the Romans (10:14-15): *How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?* They were sent to preach so that you would know Jesus. So that you would believe.

For after them would come more preachers. Peter had his Mark. Paul had his Timothy and Titus. John had his Polycarp. And after them, more preachers. But it all started with those twelve. Emperors tried to shut them up. They were martyred, exiled, tortured. Governments try to do the same today with persecution and threats. But Jesus wanted Himself and His Word preached, and so preached it was, and preached it will be. And as Jesus told those same 12 disciples who were following Him, listening to Him, and watching Him: *the gates of hell will not prevail against it* (Matthew 16:18). His Word that catches fish and catches men is more powerful than all.

And what is preached now is the same as what was preached then: that Jesus is the Christ,

the Son of the living God. Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus as the crucified and risen one who has power over sin and death and the grave. That is what we need to hear. That is the message that makes all the difference in the world.

And who it is preached by now is the same as who it was preached by then: *sinners*. Peter felt the weight of his sin. Isaiah did, too, as we heard in the Old Testament reading. Paul called himself the chief of sinners, and he wasn't humble-bragging - he meant it. For it is not those who do not need forgiveness, but those who need it most of all, who are chosen to preach it. Which may seem backward and a bit off. But so did putting out into the deep in the heat of the day. For the power is not in the preacher, but in the Word that is preached. In the Word that says: *Do not be afraid. I am not departing from you. I will not leave you to choke on your sins or sink into death. I forgive you.*

You know, those are pretty astounding words! Words that maybe because we hear them every week we don't appreciate them as much as we should. As much as Isaiah did that day when he had his vision. As much as Peter did that day in the boat. But that makes them no less true. For think about it - each week we come here and confess before the God of all, the Creator, the King of the universe, the Judge, the Almighty, that we have lived as if He did not matter, and as if I mattered most. We confess what we have done wrong (again!), what we failed to do right (again!), and that because of all this, we deserve to be placed under punishment now and punishment that won't even end after we die! That's pretty bold. Usually, when we know we've done something wrong, we deny it, we lie about it, we run away and hide, or try to hide the wrong - like Adam and Eve did; like little kids often do.

But not here. Here we confess. Because we've heard the preaching of Jesus. Because we have heard that He does not give up on us. *He's too sinful. She's beyond hope. Go to hell.* No. Instead He says *I forgive you all your sins. Again.* Yes, there is always more forgiveness than you have sin. For the blood shed for you and your forgiveness is the blood of God, and so it's power will never run out. And Jesus wants you to know that. And so He sends preachers to preach it. To fill your ears with it. And to fill your mouths with it. The same Body and Blood that died and rose for you, feeding you now with the forgiveness and life you need.

I'm sure there were times when Peter and the others didn't feel like preaching. When it seemed as if they had preached all night and caught nothing. When, even though Jesus didn't give up on them, they gave up on themselves. Maybe you too. But at just such times, they could remember what happened that day on the Lake of Gennesaret, and remind themselves not to doubt or underestimate the power of the Word of God. For it wasn't because of anything they did. It was all Jesus. All His Word. All His authority.

And that Word has now caught you. You are here not because of anything you did - not really. It was all Jesus. All His Word. All His authority. His preaching to you, His

forgiveness for you, His life for you.

And while Jesus may not have called you to be a fisher of men, a preacher, He has called you to your place in life as a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, worker, student, friend, and neighbor. And the Word of God that you have received you take into those places - whether you realize it or not. And it makes a difference. For them, for you. And especially when you give what you yourself need most of all: *forgiveness*. For still today there are those who think God should depart from them. Who think themselves unworthy and too sinful. And when you speak forgiveness, when you live forgiveness . . . that's powerful stuff. Even if you're in the deep in the heat of the day. Don't doubt of underestimate the power of God's Word. For others, or for you.

So *Arise, shine, for your light has come* (Isaiah 60:1)! Yes, your Epiphany light today is the light that preachers shine on Jesus. The light of His love and forgiveness, the light of His joy and life, that has lit up you and lights up the world.

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.