

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
Luke 5:1-11

February 7, 2010
Pastor Kim Beckmann

GRACE TO YOU AND PEACE FROM GOD AND FROM THE ONE WHO HAS COME IN GLORY AMONG US IN JESUS THE CHRIST, AMEN.

The herring were running in icy Maine off Prout's Neck. It was a stunning, unprecedented school up the Maine coast, and the entire fishing village had rushed out to sea to scoop up the green gold. Winslow Homer was a resident artist, not a fisherman, but even he felt swept into the happening. He hired one of the last boats to be found at the docks, and a boy who'd been left behind, to row him out so to sea he could sketch the men at their work. In his painting called "The Herring Net", which hangs at the Art Institute, light breaks through the overcast, anoints the fishermen, and pours silver down the fish scales of the overflowing catch nearly too heavy to haul into a boat about to land hard in the trough. It turns out that Homer's paintings of simple, hard-working life on land and sea sold well back in the industrial cities. The privileged, upper-class collectors there respected the authenticity and strength of these working people and their deeply elemental knowledge of forests, waters, and mountains.

So I'm thinking that Peter wasn't exactly uneducated. He was actually fairly well -schooled in his field of expertise: the schooling behavior of fish. You have to give him props for restraint in his patient response to Jesus' suggestion he go out further and let his nets down for a catch. He has (as he points out) been out there all night doing just that. Peter knows there are no fish there. If you consider that two boats in his co-op made Peter something of a manager in a subsistence enterprise, this business concern for his margin makes a lot of sense.

But Peter also knows nature is unpredictable. You never know when the fish will show up. And, Jesus wasn't exactly a stranger to him, either. Jesus had also shown up before, preaching in Capernaum, amazing everyone with an authority to preach good news backed up by the evidence of astounding acts of healing. In fact, Jesus had been in Peter's own home, and cured Peter's mother-in-law of a raging fever so completely she'd jumped right up to put on the Sunday dinner for everyone.

So, Peter loads up the boat and rows Jesus out to sea. He wouldn't have been too surprised, I suppose, if there had been some fish in the net. But what Peter had seen and heard from Jesus thus far apparently did not prepare him for what he saw next: Fish leaping into nets strained to the breaking, boats sinking with their glorious weight — and God. Peter saw the glory of God that fills the whole Temple with just the hem of the royal robe. Only, Peter saw it out of the box. He saw God's glory on the sea: where from the beginnings of time frightful chaos and the teeming abundance of life meet, where God speaks a Word and fills the world with life. Peter meets God's glory in these living waters. Peter saw the beauty of God's holiness in the place where he makes a daily living, the way he had first seen it at his home, in the person of Jesus.

Holy Smoke. When Peter saw this miracle of abundance, he didn't say, 'Wow, lots of fish, awesome, how can I get more?' He felt his smallness and sinfulness and the huge grace and glory that was unaccountably there for him in the presence of God, the Lord. The ever-living God shows up out on the sea, here in Peter's workplace, the place where he scratches and claws

all night for a meager living just to keep the kids in sandals. God shows up out here where things are rough and raw and rugged, where Peter's manners aren't the best, and his language frankly not so clean and holy.

This doesn't happen on the Mediterranean Gold Coast, in Caesarea Maritima, where Herod the Great had tamed wild waves by developing a port with enormous concrete blocks; brought in drinking water with impressive aqueducts; and built up the seashore with palaces and plazas of marbles and mosaics to show Rome and the rest of the world the glory of his regime then gated the area so the poor and other undesirables would be excluded.

The village of Capernaum in Peter's day sustained about 1,000 souls with subsistence fishing and nearby farmlands. Except for a few hand-piled breakwaters, the lakeshore where Jesus came to teach was open space for socializing, and selling fish, produce, and simple household wares. When the crowd backed Jesus into Peter's boat, it wasn't into some luxury liner.

I've seen the "Jesus' boat" found stuck in the Galilee mud for 2,000 years. No brass and teak here. One of the things speaking to its authenticity is the fact it is composed of so many different kinds of wood. When the boat needed repair, the fishermen just tacked in whatever they could find lying around. The kind of boat where God's glory shows up is a working skiff, not a cruise ship. It's been around. It's got marks. It's sprung a few leaks. It makes use of whatever's at hand. Its integrity is mosaic. The dingy in *The Herring Net*, some have noted, seems to have a cross at its back. The unsourced gleam doesn't come from shiny appointments. If we've learned anything so far in this year of grace it's that when God's weighty wonder comes down in the Gospels, it doesn't come to the already glorious. The Glory that comes with Jesus, God among us, happens out of the boxes, in the open, in the everyday and the ordinary, in public, where the regular people are, where the poor are welcome.

Today glory comes where Peter works for a living, and in an encounter with Jesus, he comes to a new understanding about what fish -- his staple, his life's labor, his means, and now his discipleship -- are for. I want to tip you off about a little trick Luke uses both in this gospel and the stories of the early church in Acts. In Acts, Peter gets all speaking roles, but if you look carefully you will notice that John, representing the rest of the community --the church--is always with Peter. And here, in this story? ...When the nets are full of fish, John's boat are called in and it's all hands on deck. Peter gets the recorded speaking roles, but there's a cast of thousands out in the water. What happens is astounding, unprecedented, and everyone gets swept into the act, off the shore, into the deep stuff. I wonder what they were saying to each other out there while they hauled in, and then released the abundance that had come to them in the glory of God. Because they ended up releasing it all, connecting with people, the story says, in following Jesus.

A lot of times I think we hear this story, and when we apply it to ourselves and discipleship, think, first of all, that we should be more financially generous, maybe not leaving out entire livelihood behind or giving it all away in the offering plate -- that wouldn't be prudent -- but truthfully, we could do more, take more risks. And we think the fish are the people who are out there going about Sunday plans that don't include coming to church --and there are a lot of them,--!! and we should grow the church and its resources for mission by going out there to get them into the boat. And truthfully, we could do more, take more risks to go out there. And that

while there are lots of behind-the-scenes helpers, it's the pastor like Peter who gets all the speaking roles and important church work. And if taking a risk doesn't mean a career change and running off to seminary, we're off the hook. But I don't think that anymore.

I think the fish are the everyday currency of lives lived in grace transformed by our encounters with Jesus into the coin of the realm of nothing less than the all-encompassing rule of God.

I think the real church is not in here, but out there.

And the real church is you, released, in *all* the ways you are already resourced and gifted. It's the whole of your life in the world, and your interactions and generosity with people you encounter touching them with grace even as you have been graced, that make Resurrection church a working skiff, gathering up and releasing gifts of God's abundance not just on Sunday mornings, but seven days a week, multiplying ministry in more ordinary ways than you may have imagined bear the marks for others of God's power and presence among them. Here's the encounter I had with Jesus life-revealing glory in the deep places out there that transformed my view.

A few years ago I stopped preaching to be the daughter of a mother with lung cancer. A collar-wearing colleague visited once at a local hospital and brought communion. My bishop came to the wake. But every night in bedtime prayers my mom and I gave thanks for the ways Jesus had walked with us that day through the care of people at work: living out their daily callings. I'd wait for the pastor to show up, and it was a chemo nurse who told me the truth about the life-ending work my mother needed to do now and prepared me for death. The oncologist made a house call, spinning up to my mom's broke-down shack in his Audi, bearing a sack of protein drinks his office nurse had sent along. He prescribed a growing list of medications that the pharmacists kept finding ways to get covered under insurance. One of mom's former students was the home health aide who gave her baths and reminded her of the ways her life mattered and would go on in lives she'd changed. A man came one day and set up the hospital bed in the living room with efficient respect for us and for the holy work that would take place there. The respiratory specialist showed up to whisper confidence in God's love and the power of the resurrection in mom's ear. A couple hours after the funeral my brother's company had a plate of cold cuts delivered: "Wanted to make things easier, from the APC family."

I'd waited for the pastor to come, and I hadn't grasped the real power and strength of the church released... and at large! It's so much bigger than this! It's awesome, and glorious. And the point of sweeping people in here is so the church out there is bigger and stronger.

Today Jesus calls that church from an open shoreline for the long haul, for the deep letting down and hauling up of the baptismal life of dying and rising in all the places we live and work. This isn't just about a little sprinkle from a baptismal bowl in here, but going all the way, into the deep, out in the open, out there, at large, radically reoriented by the *gravitas* of glory. I know, I get it. For many of us it's been a lot of long nights with no fish to show for it. We feel our margins are tighter than ever and there's less to risk. We scrap and scrape to keep the kids in sandals. I know how much easier it was for me to follow Jesus when I served a parish call working within the safety of the stained glass walls. It's rough and tough out there. The wide open world doesn't seem like fertile territory for new life.

But it's not exactly like Jesus is a stranger to any of us, either. He's showed up before. Perhaps he's been to your home. You've shared a Sunday dinner with him that he made possible by jumping out of the grave to bring us the promise of life. Like Peter, we've seen for ourselves God's glory, God's healing power, the astonishing miracles, the abundance and grace that has come to us. It's a wonder that sweeps us off shore into the happening. It's a moment that calls for all hands on deck. Don't be afraid. God has a knack for tacking together what's at hand to float the boat. And will patch it up when it springs a leak or two. On the day we set sail with Jesus into abundant life in our baptism, new members of the priesthood of all believers are given a candle. In Christ, we are already places where God dwells, and networked as revealing lights of life to the world, in everyday ways that bear Christ and are church more than you ever imagined. So, what are your fish for? Amen.