

Called To The Light

A Sermon from Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church

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January 27, 2008 – Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1, 4-9;
1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

I once shared with you a story that forever changed my understanding of the gospel lesson this morning:

Several years ago, a member of the church I served in Houston went fishing with his three teenaged sons. There was an accident, and the boat they were in capsized. The three sons were fine, but they could not find their father.

Days later, after a very worried vigil by family and friends, the police came to the house, to tell us that they had 'fished the father's body from the lake a few miles from where the accident had occurred."

I realized that for the fishermen Simon Peter and Andrew who regularly went out in small boats on the Sea of Galilee to catch fish for their livings, the term "fish for people" had a profound meaning.

Unlike fish, who belong in the water, and are 'fished out' to be used as food; people don't belong in the water; indeed, people are in danger of drowning in the water. To 'fish' a person out of the water is about rescue and can be a matter of life or death.

Commercial fishing has always been one of the most dangerous of jobs, and certainly even more so in Jesus' day.

Simon Peter and Andrew had surely known others who had drowned when a sudden storm overwhelmed one or more of those small boats caught out in the Sea of Galilee. They may, indeed, have fished others out of the water, either dead or alive, or perhaps they had been fished out themselves, and knew what it meant to be rescued from danger of being 'lost at sea.'

Today, fishermen use radar and weather services to help them stay out of dangerous waters. Even with modern technology, it remains a perilous vocation.

In Jesus day, conditions were decided by winds and stars and the color of the sky. If the one making the decision was mistaken, a sudden storm could mean doom for everyone in the boat.

Jesus lived in stormy times. His country was occupied by foreign forces; the economic system was corrupt, and unjust. The poor and helpless were especially vulnerable. It was a time of both political and religious upheaval. Both the leaders and the people had turned away from the basic tenets of their faith: care for the least and the last. Religion had become big business, and a profitable one at that. It may have felt as though many were lost and in danger.

The Jewish people were divided into many sects and there was a multitude of voices looking for followers among the confused and bewildered people. Preachers stood on almost every corner, each with a different message, some promoting rebellion, which had already led to bloody massacres by the Roman authorities in order to 'keep the peace.'

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It must have been difficult for anyone to know what message to trust, what direction was the right one.

The problem was not that weren't answers. The problem was that there were many answers, and they were all in conflict.

It was a time much like our own, I think.

I don't know about you, but I am often overwhelmed by both the pain, and the problems and what seems to be insanity of our world; and I am just as overwhelmed about all the conflicting information thrown at me.

Let's take something basic as an example: as a girl, my mother believed it was healthy for us to eat organ meats at least once a week, you know – liver and onions and the like. It was common knowledge how healthy that was for us, how very high in iron!

As I grew up, we discovered that those items are high in cholesterol, and should be avoided, unless, of course, you believe the experts that say that it is carbohydrates, not high cholesterol food that gives us high cholesterol.

There are competing experts on every street corner to proclaim their beliefs about everything from something as basic as what we should eat to the best candidate for political office. Is there anything that isn't controversial?

So many choices. Some trivial, but some important. Some that may indeed be life and death.

Whom can we trust? Whom do we follow? Who will lead us into the storm, and who will lead us away from danger?

It is not hard to imagine those fisherman, living in a time of religious foment, seeing the struggle of their people, and feeling overwhelmed, because I feel the same way. In their day, as in ours, there are questions about religious authorities, political authorities, any authorities. They all seem to have failed us. So many have chosen to not listen to any authority, save their own. And that doesn't work all that well, either. A kind of ethical anarchy reigns in many areas of our world, especially the business world.

The response of the disciples to Jesus was amazing, and instantaneous.

Jesus told them to follow him and he would make them 'fishers of people.'

We are reading this passage during the season of Epiphany, so we know that those soon-to-be-disciples had "a moment of sudden revelation or insight."

It is interesting to me that he didn't say to them: "Follow me and I will make you rich or powerful, or even happy." He didn't even say, "Follow me and I will give you wisdom."

He didn't say, "follow and admire me" or "come with me for a little while, or when you have a little free time," either.

The invitation was for a total and timeless commitment.

He said, "follow me and I will make you fishers of people." Which meant to them, I believe, that they would be helping others. They would be making a difference for those who might be in over their heads. For all their people.

They saw in Jesus the light for their dark times.

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They were in Jesus' day as those Isaiah wrote about: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. . . For the yoke of their burden and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian." (Isaiah 9:2, 4)

Ched Myers has noted that "fishing for people" is a reference to a prophecy referenced in Ezekiel's prophecy against the Pharaoh in Egypt:

Let me read that to you:

"Thus says the Holy One: I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, the great dragon sprawling in the midst of its channels, saying, "My Nile is my own; I made it for myself."

I will put hooks in your jaws, and make the fish of your channels stick to your scales.

I will draw you up from your channels, with all the fish of your channels sticking to your scales.

I will fling you into the wilderness, you and all the fish of your channels; you shall fall in the open field, and not be gathered and buried.

To the animals of the earth and to the birds of the air I have given you as food.

Then all the inhabitants of Egypt shall know that I am the Holy One because you were a staff of reed to the house of Israel; when they grasped you with the hand, you broke, and tore all their shoulders; and when they leaned on you, you broke, and made all their legs unsteady.

Therefore, thus says the Holy One our God: I will bring a sword upon you, and will cut off from you human being and animal; and the land of Egypt shall be a desolation and a waste. Then they shall know that I am the Holy One."

The Pharaoh of Egypt is depicted as a great dragon inhabiting the waters of the Nile, as if it owns it, oppressing all around it.

God, we are told, will fish Pharaoh out of the Nile, along with the Pharaoh's people: and toss it into a field, where the dragon will be fed to wildlife.

It is not a stretch to think that those Jewish fishermen to whom Jesus spoke, those Jewish fishermen living in an occupied land, oppressed by a foreign regime, would recognize that when Jesus called them to 'fish for people,' they would remember that image from the prophet Ezekiel, and hear this as an invitation to live into the kin-dome, trusting God to end the reign of oppressors, thereby rescuing the oppressed.

Whether it is 'fishing' oppressors from the river, or 'fishing' for those who are drowning, these texts come to life, and I begin to understand why those fishermen dropped everything to follow Jesus. He was holding out a compelling vision to them.

A mission that moved them to action.

They saw need around them. They felt it themselves. They saw oppression, they saw people in danger, in pain, they saw the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. I'm sure they felt as powerless as we feel seeing so much need around them.

Not to mention their own needs, their own pain, their own longings.

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As you know, I am still recovering from pneumonia. One of the things I know about this illness is that the real danger is fluid in the lungs. In other words, it is possible to drown from the inside, as well.

I've been thinking about that a lot, as you can imagine.

So many things have come to my attention lately that have made me think about how the human spirit can be drowned from within; ways in which we can get in over our heads; and ways we can be our own oppressors. Like a twelve year old girl with a six month old child, who has been sleeping with so many boys since she was eleven that she doesn't know who her baby's father is. Drowning in her need to be loved.

Like a friend of mine who has lost his job, alienated his family, and is now so isolated by his addiction to alcohol that he is in over his head. There is the young woman whose addiction to shopping has bankrupted her family.

The gambler who has lost everything seeking to get rich.

Then there is the couple with two young children, who are now involved in the sexually permissive 'swingers' life style; but as they turn to counseling to try to help them repair the inevitable fault lines that have emerged in their marriage, they decide not to tell the counselor that they continue to frequent their swingers club (as if that has nothing to do with their marital troubles: how's that for the blinding nature of addiction?)

All addictive behavior reminds me of what Frederick Buechner said about lust: "It is the hunger for salt by a person dying of thirst."

There are many answers. Not all of them lead to life. Indeed, what may appear as freedom, may be the dragon in the Nile for us.

And we are all addicted to something. Food, money, approval, sex, alcohol, drugs, power, gambling, spending, there is no shortage of internal dragons

Our addiction may be a substance, or it may be an activity. It may even be staying very, very busy. At the root of all our addictions is a hole in our soul.

Addiction is a form of idolatry, for addiction has at its roots the belief that something other than God will be our salvation. That anything other than God can fill that hole in our soul.

Addictions do not give life. They keep us unconscious instead of helping us be more conscious.

We can learn yet one more thing from those fishermen that Jesus called: the kind of fishing they did, and the kind of fishing to which Jesus calls us. This kind of fishing is not done individually like an angler with a fishing rod. It takes a group of folks to cast those heavy nets. A group of folks to haul in the catch: a group. A community. To follow Jesus is to **be in community**. Addictions isolate. Oppression divides and seeks to separate. The way of Jesus reminds us that we are all connected. That we are all in the same boat.

"Come, follow me," Jesus said.

Come, and live for others.

That is so un-American. So not what our culture of individualism teaches us. It is why Paul says, "it is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God."

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Come, learn from Jesus. Come, spend time in prayer. Come, grow close to God through studying scripture and listening for God in all things in community. Come, help be part of the healing. Come, be in community with others who want to follow the way of Jesus.

Come, learn to love everyone unconditionally. Those who have hurt you. Those you don't like. Those who would do you harm. Come, learn to love. Deeply. Fully. Learn to see your own belovedness and see the belovedness of all you meet. Of course the world will find it foolish. Of course you will continue to hear the voices of others calling – like the sirens who would have you crash into the rocks. There will always be those voices. But this is the way. I'm not talking about doctrines that others have taught you about Jesus. I am talking about the way he lived his life, close to the source, loving, forgiving, healing, teaching, non violent, and just. It is the way to life.

It is the way out of addiction, It is the way out of oppression and oppressing others. It is the way of life.

It was an epiphany to those fishermen. They left what they were doing and followed.

And I believe that following Jesus is the way to life even now. I believe that if we, as a community of faith, commit ourselves to following the way of Jesus, it does make a difference. Indeed, it can change the world. It is the only thing that can.

I do not mean that Jesus is the only one to have taught the way of love and justice and non-violence. One can find it in other places. But it is Jesus who calls to me – who calls to you—to choose – it is Jesus who has walked that way ahead of us and who shows us the way.

Come, follow me, he invites us.

The response is up to us.

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