

# Heading Out Into Deep Water

Luke 5:1-11  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Over the past several weeks we've heard stories from the Gospel of Luke about Jesus' identity, his mission, and how his hometown synagogue folks rejected him after they hear Jesus wasn't going to give them preferential treatment. After learning about the launch of Jesus' public ministry we turn today to Jesus' calling disciples to join the mission.

There's an entire genre of biblical literature commonly known as call stories. They are found in both the Old and New Testaments. For instance, God's call to Abraham and Sarah, to Moses, to Deborah, to the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. And there's a call to Zechariah and Elizabeth, to Mary, to John the Baptist, to Jesus, to Peter, Paul, and others. **There's a commonality found in most call stories. They typically begin with reluctance, either because the task seems impossible, the person feels inept, or both.** We've just heard Isaiah's call story. Hear, now, Simon Peter's call story.

## Luke 5:1-11

<sup>1</sup>Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, <sup>2</sup>he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. <sup>3</sup>He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.

<sup>4</sup>When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.' <sup>5</sup>Simon answered, 'Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.' <sup>6</sup>When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break.

<sup>7</sup>So they signalled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. <sup>8</sup>But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!' <sup>9</sup>For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; <sup>10</sup>and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.' <sup>11</sup>When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

May God bless the reading and the hearing of this word. Amen.

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Confronted with divine glory in the heavenly temple, and believing himself to be “unclean” among “unclean people, Isaiah initially withdraws, saying, “Woe is me! I am lost!” (Isa 6:5). Isaiah eventually responds with the familiar, “Here I am, Lord, send me,” now a popular hymn we will sing in a few moments. And likewise, confronted with divine glory in Jesus, and believing himself to be unworthy, Simon Peter falls at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” (Luke 5:8).

**What both of these men shared in common was not a lack of trust in God or Jesus. Rather, it was a lack of faith in themselves, in their own capacities and worth.** More on that in a moment, and how that connects with our experiences.

During my first semester at seminary, there was a special class for the incoming students when each of us had the opportunity to share our own sense of God’s call into ministry. Almost to a person, it included a good bit of fear and trepidation. The same is often true when a person in a congregation is called to serve by being ordained and installed as a ruling elder on the session. **God’s call to ministry and mission, however, isn’t limited to those in leadership positions in a community of faith. God’s call is to everyone. That call isn’t about hierarchy, prestige, or privilege - it’s about differing forms of service.** That call involves furthering the ways of God, using the gifts each one of us has been blessed with by the Holy Spirit, working together to follow the ways and teachings of Jesus. Therefore, in one way or another, **each one of us is involved in discerning God’s call upon our lives.**

Let’s look, then, at what we can discover from the story of Jesus’ call to Simon Peter, and how we might apply what we learn to ourselves, individually and as a community of faith. On the surface, we have a story telling us that near the very beginning of Jesus’ public ministry such a large crowd comes out to see him at the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee (Luke uses another name, the lake of Gennesaret) that Jesus gets into a boat and puts out a little way from the shore so that he can be heard and seen by the entire crowd. The owner of the boat happens to be a fisherman named Simon, who later identified as Simon Peter, and even later, just Peter. Though Simon and his fishing buddies were already cleaning their nets after a disappointing night of catching no fish, Jesus tells Simon to put out into the deep water and let down his nets for a catch. We’re talking about a weary professional fisherman here, so we can only imagine what his first reaction must have been to this itinerate preacher telling him how to fish. But for some reason Simon decides to trust this teacher named Jesus.

Following Jesus’ instruction to head out into deep water, the result is that so many fish were caught that Simon calls in his fishing partners in the other boat to come and help. When both boats were filled to the point that they began to sink, Simon Peter became deeply humbled. So much so that Jesus responds, “Do not be afraid.” This is a common biblical phrase by those representing the Presence of God – an epiphany moment, if you will. Then comes the shocking end to this fishing story. When Jesus tells the fishermen, which now include brothers James and John, that from now on they will be catching people for the kin-dom of God, not fish, they surprisingly left everything and followed Jesus.

That’s one heck of a fishing story. But it’s even more amazing when looked through the lens of its purpose for the gospel writer. For **this becomes not just a story that happened once upon a time, but happens all the time, to this very day, including to you and me. For Luke, this story is about discipleship, about being called to ministry and service, and how you and I choose to respond.**

I want to present **three observations** that can be made regarding our calling into discipleship. **First, the fishermen had done nothing to warrant or merit Jesus' call to them.** Regardless of what Jesus may have seen in them, to contend that he called the most capable or most qualified to be his disciples would contradict an important element in the Gospel narrative. The fishermen had no training for this new line of work. They were ordinary working folks. We have no indication that they were called because of their qualifications, character, or even potential. Again, both Isaiah's and Simon Peter's initial reaction was an overwhelming feeling of being unworthy, to the point of acknowledging their own sinfulness. Therefore, **it should be a source of comfort and reassurance to know that we don't have to possess what we think is the 'right stuff,' like a perfect life or expert biblical knowledge, before God can use us to further God's kingdom in our midst.** Remember this mantra:

- God doesn't call those who are empowered, God empowers those who are called.

**Second,** Jesus' call to discipleship did not come in a holy place, like the temple or a synagogue, but in the midst of the fishermen's ordinary daily work. This point is significant because it is a further sign of the ordinary work of God's realm, Jesus' new beloved community, that reaches into the arena of everyday human life. **God comes to us, including from within us, and calls to us in the midst of the ordinariness of our everyday lives.** The ministry begun by Jesus, therefore, involves us wherever we find ourselves, and at whatever we are doing. **Discipleship is everywhere, all the time,** not just a Sunday morning kind of thing.

And that leads us to the **third** point, that **the call to follow the ways and teachings of Jesus may require a change in our priorities and a reordering of our commitments.** As we are often reminded, discipleship comes with a cost. We're told that the first disciples made the dramatic decision to leave everything and follow Jesus. While it's understandable that we don't like to be told what our priorities should be and how we should live our lives, it is true that at one level serving God in our daily lives does require a commitment on our part, and at another level, it may require a change in some of our priorities.

I love the part of story in Isaiah 6 in which **Isaiah, in a vision, overhears God asking, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Have there not been times and circumstances pop up now and again in your own life when you sensed being asked that same question? I have, time and again.** Yet, a lot of times we may hope that someone else will raise their hand and volunteer to answer the call. God, send someone else, I'm so busy and tired. Send someone else, I'm not qualified. Send someone else, it's not my job. Perhaps we, like so many biblical characters, are afraid. Yet at other times we, like Isaiah, may gather the courage to respond, "Here am I, send me."

It is here that this fishing story can continue to be instructive. Where is it that Jesus tells Simon Peter to go to catch fish? Jesus says, **"Put out into the deep water."** Luke meant this to have a **metaphorical meaning** beyond its literal understanding. What does it mean for you and I, for us as a community of faith, to head out into deep water? **Deep water means moving beyond the safety, security, familiarity, and comfort of the shallow water near the shoreline.** Perhaps the Spirit of God is calling you right now to leave the shallow places in your life and head out to explore the depths. Yes, **there is**

**risk in leaving what is familiar and comfortable, even traditional.** It takes trust and courage to go just a little bit deeper, to where things aren't so certain, to where we can't see what lies beneath, to where things are going to be different.

What deeper water are you being called to explore? Perhaps it's going deeper within yourself. What deeper water is College Hill being called to venture into? We have been in deep water before, especially in the area of social justice, and we will continue to do so. Anti-racism work, for example, is something many of us have discerned to be more actively engaged.

Like that miraculous catch of fish, **what abundance might be waiting** if you and I were to risk heading out from the shallow end into deeper uncharted territory, and there let down our nets? And notice that Simon Peter couldn't do it all by himself. He had to call his friends, his partners, to help. We learn **we need to share the labor, so that our nets don't break and our boat doesn't sink.** This work and ministry, especially when it's out in deep water, is something we do together, in community. In relation to this need for help so that our own boat doesn't sink, especially during these times of pandemic, the Rev. Teri McDowell Ott, the Editor/Publisher of *The Presbyterian Outlook* wrote this week:

When I read this text today, I think of all the exhausted people trying to serve and be faithful to Christ's call in this pandemic. The teacher contemplating early retirement because [the] school board hasn't prioritized [their] health and safety. The hospital chaplain who has run out of creative ways to support those who are called to care for the sick and dying. The church pastor who just can't perform or pretend anymore that [they] are happy [or feel productive] in [their] current call. [As an aside, yes, pastors are part of this current movement, accelerated by the effects of the pandemic, called the Great Resignation.]

But I don't believe we need to read this text as Jesus calling us to push beyond our physical and spiritual limits, to work ourselves to the bone, to sacrifice our health for the sake of others. Jesus himself took time away for prayer and rest.

Jesus never calls us to shoulder all the work alone. Simon has fishing partners and a second boat. There are twelve disciples, not one.

If you find yourself out in deep water, first of all, know that God is there with you, within you, and for you. Also, reflect upon who you might need to call to partner along with you before your net breaks or your boat sinks?

Here I am, Lord. Send me.

Here we are, Lord. Send us.

Amen.

Resources:

SALT Commentary for Epiphany Week Five, [saltproject.org](http://saltproject.org), 1-31-22.

Teri McDowell Ott, Looking Into the Lectionary – 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, [pres-outlook.org](http://pres-outlook.org), 1-31-22.