

At Jesus' Word

Text: Luke 5:1-11

Hymn: "Come, Follow Me," the Savior Spake (*LSB* 688)

Someone has said—and I think “tongue in cheek”—that the only thing that casts doubt on the miracles of Jesus is that they were all reported by fishermen. Fishermen do have a reputation for stretching the truth. There’s the one about the fisherman who spent a fishless day of fishing. He had fished from sunrise until late in the afternoon and caught nothing but was determined not to go home to his family without any fish to provide for the supper table. So, in desperation, on his way home he made a stop at the local fish market. He picked three fat fish from the display case. Then, with a twinkle in his eye, he said to the clerk, “Before you wrap them up, toss them to me carefully. I want to tell my wife honestly that I ‘caught’ them.”

The evangelist reporting the event of our text today could have been a fisherman, but he’s not—he’s a physician. St. Luke was a physician who, at the beginning of his Gospel, says he investigated everything thoroughly in order to give an orderly account of what happened in the life of our Lord Jesus. On top of that, it is written by the Holy Spirit Himself who caused the Scriptures to be written for our learning (Rom 15:4). So, this isn’t simply the report of the fisherman in our text; it’s the report of the Holy Spirit through the pen of a physician who meticulously investigated the claims.

The disciples had been fishing all night. Now they weren’t fishing as a hobby; they fished for their livelihood. It was a business for them. The very names of the towns around the Lake of Gennesaret reflect how popular the fishing industry was there. On its western shore was Magdala, an Aramaic word meaning “tower of fishes,” also

known as *Ταριχέα*, a Greek word that means “a place for pickling,” a town where people were likely employed to pack and export fish all over the area. On the northern shore was Bethsaida, which was where four of the twelve apostles came from. Bethsaida means “house of fishing.” Think of it as the Galveston of Israel.

There, in addition to bringing in the day’s catch, fishermen had to do what fisherman have always had to do—they had to mend their nets. They had to repair and maintain the boats. They had to preserve the fish. They had to bargain with the local merchants in order to sell or trade the catch they acquired. It was an exhausting job. It wasn’t a 9-to-5 kind of job. It involved work late at night, sometimes all-night fishing, since it was at night that the surface of the water would be cooler. Then the fish would rise and the catch would be easier. Much harder to get a catch during the day.

So, when our text says that they were washing their nets, it's telling us that they had already finished the bulk of the work. They had been all night fishing. Having cleaned the nets, they were ready to go home, since there was nothing to trade or sell; they had caught nothing. This was one of those days that the fishermen dreaded. Not only would they be tired from trying so hard, but they were frustrated because they had tried so hard and had nothing to show for it. Disappointed to say the least, discouraged, undoubtedly disheartened.

You’ve been there, too. In your own life, in your own occupation, you’ve been there with nothing in your nets. You worked hard at what you did, morning to night, spending who knows how many years hour driving an hour to work, an hour back. And then at the end of a hard day, suddenly you’re notified you don’t have a job any more. The net seemingly is empty. You’ve worked hard at your marriage, but it obviously

wasn't hard enough. Empty net. You did everything the doctor said you should do, but it wasn't to be. Empty net. You gave your children everything you could. You brought them here and there and everywhere. You instructed them in the Word of truth, but now the Word and Sacrament that alone brings them the forgiveness of sins is no longer a priority for them. Empty net.

You worked hard at what you did but it didn't turn out the way you thought it would—that empty net feeling. We've all been there with the disciples in one way or another. And Jesus came to them. The text says that the crowd was pressing in on Him, because they all in one way or another had empty nets to bring Him. Jesus saw two boats just sitting there, boats that were vacated, because nothing was being accomplished in them. Jesus takes what is vacated because of man's inability to come up with anything and He changes it into a pulpit to proclaim the Word of God that created everything, the Word of God which on the fifth day caused empty waters to teem with fish, and now is about to do the same thing and fill the empty nets of the fishermen of Galilee.

At sermon's end, Jesus turns to Simon Peter and says, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." I've preached the Word to you; now let down your nets into the deep. And then a miracle happens. And I'm not talking about that simple miracle of fish suddenly filling the mended net of Peter, but the miracle of faith created in the mended heart of Peter. That's the real miracle today—Peter filled with faith that enabled him to look at the Master and see him for who He is. Take note of the divinely arranged sequence: Peter first of all hears the word of God which puts faith in his heart, a faith which then responds with an obedience that only faith can produce. "Master, we

toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.” Faith speaking what before hearing the Word it would never have said. But now it’s heard the Word—a God-generated faith producing faith-generated works, works that dare to do what the Word of God says to do even when it flies in the face of vocational experience or human reason.

Don’t you think that’s what happened to Peter and his companions? It all flew in the face of common sense. Don’t you think there were a whole lot of seasoned fishermen that day who had learned from their fathers some tried and true rules, including the rule that you fish at night not during the heat of the day, who laughed at these fishermen going back out in the heat of the day on advice from a carpenter? But Peter says to them, “Raise your eyebrows at me, laugh all you want; at Jesus’ word I will put down the nets.”

Faith did what the Word of God told them to do. And the Word of God did what it said it would do. The boats were so full of fish they began sinking. God in the Flesh doing far more than we can imagine or think. No wonder that Peter, now sweaty from pulling in all these fish into his boat, fish flopping all around him, looked up and, recognizing that within ten feet of him stood God-in-the-flesh, fell penitently and humbly to his knees and said, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”

You began this day just a few moments ago with no less a confession than Peter made. The sinfulness of which Peter spoke is the sinfulness of which we speak when we make our confession: “I, a poor, miserable sinner,” or echoing both the words of Peter on the boat and those of Isaiah in heaven’s temple, “We confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean.”

And the forgiveness you receive is no less than that granted Peter. Peter heard the forgiving, “Do not be afraid.” And that absolution freed him to confess Jesus as the Christ before men, even as that same word of absolution in our day forgives us and then frees us to confess Christ before the world that we too might be doing what Peter did, catching souls with our confession of Jesus. That same word, that same enfleshed Christ enabling us to do the thing it has done throughout the ages, the power of Christ’s Word going into the deep with the Simon Peters and the Jameses and Johnses and the likes of you and me, sinners forgiven, the unclean made clean, the unholy made holy, all of us who have in one way or another thought we were on top of things or in control of things only to find out in the end we weren’t. But when we’re so far out in the deep that we’ve lost all control and we’re overwhelmed by it all, how good it is to have Christ Jesus at our side. How good it is to know that He’s gone out into the deep with us, not as some assistant or underling who merely follows at our heels to do our bidding whenever we call upon him to do so; no, Jesus is what Peter called him—“Master”—the one with whom rests the control of our lives. The one with whom rests our destiny and our eternity.

So, “Master...at Your Word, I will let down the nets.” At Your Word.

Pastor Brent McGuire  
Our Redeemer Lutheran Church