

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

February 6, 2022 – EPIPHANY 5C

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Letting Go and Letting God*”

Isaiah 6:1-8	(The prophet Isaiah sees Heaven and accepts God’s call)
Psalms 138	(Thanks to the Lord for His goodness and mercy)
1 Corinthians 15:1-11	(St. Paul preaches the essentials: Christ died and was raised)
St. Luke 5:1-11	(A miraculous catch of fish leads Jesus’ disciples to follow Him)

Although there have been many technological developments over the past two thousand years, commercial fishing really hasn’t changed all that much. In spite of diesel-powered boats, radar, sonar, detailed and accurate charts of the sea, satellite-assisted navigation, and ship-to-shore phones, fishing for a living is still pretty much the same kind of activity it was in Jesus’ time. It’s about setting out on the water, leaving the safety of dry land, and trusting the laws of nature and the goodness of God. It’s about hoping and praying for a good and bountiful catch, without having to make gargantuan efforts to make that happen.

Compare fishing to farming. Farmers produce a good harvest mostly through hard work—careful preparation of the soil, ensuring the seeds have proper nutrition and moisture, safeguarding the crops from pests. Of course, the weather plays a part, but it is only one of a very complex set of factors.

Make no mistake, fishing is hard work, too: maintaining a boat, studying charts, repairing nets, and getting the catch to market while it’s still fresh, just for a start. But in fishing, whether there are fish or whether there are none, whether the wind blows enough to move your boat along or rages so much your ship is capsized—these things are totally out of our control. Despite the innovations of state-of-the-art technology, professional-standard training, and years of experience at sea, fishing still pretty much comes down to putting one’s hope in God.¹

In today’s Gospel message, Jesus demonstrates what happens when we *do* trust God. How the Lord will meet our needs, and even provide abundantly above our expectations. But what has to happen, first? In this story from St. Luke, Jesus is a little way offshore, teaching the crowds from a small boat in which He is seated.

He sees that Simon and his crew haven’t caught anything after trying all night, and suggests they let down their nets once more. I don’t know about you, but I picture a look of astonishment, and frankly, disgusted aggravation on Simon’s face. What does this carpenter-slash-rabbi know about fishing? Doesn’t He realize how exhausted we are? Doesn’t He know that fish come to the surface at night, and in the daytime, they hide? As the professional fisherman here, Simon could have simply refused and started packing up to go home. But he doesn’t. Notice, he says to Jesus, “if *you* say so, I will let down the nets.” Ah. The first step to letting go and letting God—*obedience to His will*.

Luke doesn’t indicate how long it took to catch fish in the daytime this close to shore—basically, a near-impossibility. Because next, the fish are practically jumping into Simon’s boat! The catch is so huge, their craft starts to sink and Simon has to call in James’ and John’s boat to take up the gigantic surplus. Can you imagine the commotion on the shore? The crowd that had been listening to Jesus’ teaching was likely jumping up and down, yelling and screaming, clapping and high-fiving each other, overcome with joy and excitement at the wild abundance they were witnessing.

Simon himself is so overcome by this miracle of Jesus’ that he falls down before the Lord and confesses his sinful nature. Ah. The second step to letting go and letting God—confession of our sins, and *repentance*, before the only One who *can* forgive us.

After all this happy craziness with more fish than anyone knows what to do with, what does Jesus say next? “Do not be afraid; from now on, you will be catching people.” I now picture Simon looking politely puzzled, still not quite getting what Jesus is about.

And yet, Luke tells us that after the men stowed their boats ashore (I'm guessing the crowd helped themselves to all the fish), "they left *everything* and followed" Jesus. Ah. The third step to letting go and letting God—when we *surrender* ourselves and everything in our lives to Him.

Obedience, repentance, and surrender. All of these are involved in learning to fully trust God, and God alone. But perhaps these steps don't work in quite the order of St. Luke's narrative. I would venture to say we have to *repent* of our sins first—and receive God's forgiveness—then we are free to *surrender* ourselves and our lives to God. And it is that humility which enables us to be *obedient*.

As this Gospel account concludes, Jesus is teaching both His future disciples, and us, that if we trust in God—who provides everything we need—we *will* be given what it takes to catch people, to make disciples of all nations, to build up the Church.

Sounds great. Except, fishing for people can be as dicey an operation as catching fish in the sea. We make an effort to invite someone to church, or we bravely overcome our nervousness and actually tell someone about what Jesus has done for us. Yet nothing comes of it. There are no fish at all. So, maybe we take the boat out again. We work hard to create an event at St. John's that will bring lots of people, some of whom will want to worship with and serve our parish. But after it's all over, our nets come up empty, again.

Commercial fishing is fraught with challenge and hope, success and failure, life and death, sacrifice and joy, divine beauty and unimaginable ugliness. So is this truly what God is calling us to? Do we really want to trap people in a net into which we have lured them? Is it our vocation to haul them in, kicking and screaming, flailing and flopping? And if we get 'em, are we to revel in this catch? Tallying the number *we've* managed to drag in, and then thank God for this blessing?

Some denominations would say "Yes" to all that. But in our Anglican tradition, we offer a different vision of what it means to grow the Church. Yes, we are truly glad, and we do thank God, when the Church increases in people who share their time, talents, and treasure for Christ's sake. But when we hear Jesus say: "From now on you will be catching people," we must stop and ask ourselves, aren't we the same kind of "fish" as they are? Are we under the illusion that we are somehow better than those we seek to bring to Christ? No.

Rather, we remember how Peter, when he experienced the miracle of God's presence in Christ, and saw his boat sinking with so many fish aboard, fell down at Jesus' feet and cried, "Go away from me, for I am sinful." And we remember that this big fish story reveals the miraculous power of Christ, as available and present to the simple fishermen of Galilee two millennia ago, as it is to you and me today, through God's Word and Sacraments. We remember and celebrate the power of God that we *know* is not ours. We also remember Jesus' reply to Peter's awareness of his unworthiness before God, which Christ says to us, too: "*Do not be afraid.*" This comfort was theirs, out on that lake long ago, and it is ours, here and now.

Fishing can be painful, both for those who fish, and the ones that are caught. That is why Jesus calling His followers to be fishers of people does not give Christians license to abuse others in His name—to beat them over the head with a Bible, or hold ourselves up as an ideal they are to attain. Rather, Christ calls us to love persons unconditionally into the Church as a fellowship of sinners, not saints.

If we continue to identify with Peter's honest confession of his shortcomings before Christ, as well as his willingness to drop everything and follow the Lord, our example of *repentance, submission, and obedience*—and, trusting God for the results—will do more to help us catch people than any clever church-growth schemes.

Despite Jesus' miraculous demonstration of God's abundant provision in today's Gospel story, sometimes we need to be content with the smallest gifts from above. After all, God doesn't grow the Church by bringing us busloads of Episcopalians—as was a previous parishioner's dream. The Lord grows His Church one person at a time. That's how *you* got here. Thanks be to God!

¹ Adapt. J. Barrington Bates, "The Kind of Fishers God Calls Us to Be," 7 February 2010, [EpiscopalChurch.org](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/the-kind-of-fishers-god-calls-us-to-be-epiphany-5-c-2010/) <<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/the-kind-of-fishers-god-calls-us-to-be-epiphany-5-c-2010/>> 29 January 2022. Used with permission.