



February 7th 2010 - The Rev. Scott Pittendrigh
Text: Isaiah 6: 1-8; Psalm 138; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11
Using resources by John Shea and Richard Rohr.

Gracious and loving God,
You are in the boat with us.
We sail with you into
the known and unknown.

You are the winds in our sail.
We can go out into the deep waters
without fear.

Our nets are full;
our lives graced;
our future abundant.

Hallelujah!

Amen.

I don't know how many of you out there are people who like to fish. For some of us it is a passionate pastime that brings us closer to God's Creation, not to mention a means of putting wonderful food on the table. For others of us it is not such a fun activity -- even if we do like to eat fish, some of us may not be crazy about the catching and cleaning part.

I hadn't been fishing for twenty years (and had never in my life gone salmon or halibut fishing) until last September when I accepted a kind and gracious invitation from Ken Conrad to join him, along with Adrian Rees and another friend of Ken's, for a day of salmon fishing on the west coast. I realized that although there have been many technological developments; fishing hasn't really changed that much in the last two thousand years. In spite of all our diesel-powered boats, radar, detailed and accurate charts of the sea, satellite-assisted navigation, and the like, fishing is still pretty much the same kind of activity it was in Jesus' time.

Fishing is about setting out on the water, about leaving the safety of the dry land and trusting the laws of physics and the goodness of God. It's about hoping and praying for a good, bountiful catch -- but not really being able to do a whole lot to make that happen. Oh, and speaking of "trusting the laws of physics", I also learned that such laws could indeed be trusted -- yes, I learned that rocking boats on open seas with large swells can produce a color on the face that matches our seasonal hangings, not to mention a feeling in the stomach that makes you want to die! No, I could not make that feeling go away (even after I was gently deposited on land again and waved goodbye as the rest of my fishing-mates went back out to sea --thank God Adrian remained with me on shore). I couldn't make that feeling go away any more than they could make the fish bite.



I also learned in my one (and probably) only fishing expedition that it involves risk and trust. We chartered a boat and a fishing guide. All of us, even those among us who had many years of fishing experience on the open ocean had to take a risk that this guide would lead us to where we would have a good catch and we had to place our trust in him that he would do what he said he would do and that he would keep us safe while we were in his hands.

Risk and trust have been on my mind a lot, lately. Things happen to us and to our world all the time that let us know we are not in control; that there are some things we cannot make happen, and that there are other things we cannot stop from happening. Someone we know and love gets cancer and dies, in what seems to be a very short period of time. The earth shakes violently in Haiti for just over a minute and nearly 200,000 people die. And on another scale, but one that carries with it real loss and real grief, the Diocesan Transformation Team publishes their report and the earth shakes for a number of parishes in this diocese. We all know that none of us are exempt from sudden change coming to any one of us at any time. We may be tempted to live under the illusion that this won't happen to us. That bad things will not happen to us if we try and control our world and make certain things happen. But it is just that—an illusion. Most of us realize that we are really all the same. That it is only because of the geography we inhabit, the body we live in, and the church we happen be worshipping in, that keeps us from being an earthquake, a diagnosis, and a church-closing away from massive change in our lives. Risk and trust go along with faith. Yes, we have faith in God and in Jesus and yet we need to take the risk of going forward into an unknown future, trusting that we are in God's good hands on the sea of life that, at times, can be very unpredictable, and very scary.

I love the way that the fifth chapter of Luke's gospel begins for this reason. It's about how the first disciples of Jesus were called to follow him, beginning in this case, with Simon Peter. The way Luke writes this, being a disciple is defined in terms of risk and trust: "Simon, put out into deep water and put your nets out for a catch."

Simon is the one fisherman who should know the sea and understand it. At this point, there is no reason for him to trust Jesus, so he replies "We worked hard all night long and caught nothing. But if you say so, I will put out the net." So this new life, in other words, this new church, this new community, is going to have to depend on people trusting the Lord and risking the Lord's truth even against their own temporary truth. Then comes the part of the story where they net such a huge catch that their nets begin to tear and two boats are filled to the sinking point with fish. With this, Jesus is preparing these first disciples to understand how they will gather the people of God together. Spiritual entrepreneurship, you might say. Following Jesus, in other words, leads to abundance and fullness.

Jesus knows how to speak to Peter in his fishing world so that it becomes a magnificent, awe-inspiring sign for him. In effect, Peter is saying to Jesus, "This is the world I know and I know how it works; if you can turn my fishing world upside down, you're for real." So Jesus isn't talking synagogue language or theological language, he's talking fishing language. That's the language and imagery best designed to lead Peter out of himself and confess his faith in Another.

That's when Peter falls to his knees and says "Leave me Lord, for I am a sinful man." He is overwhelmed and amazed. His response reflects the proper attitude for all who happen upon the immensity of God. The fullness and abundance of divine reality dwarfs him. He experiences his own smallness and



inadequacy. He feels that he is not worthy of what he has experienced. The greatness of the Creator and the smallness of the creature go hand in hand. Simon Peter is in a long line of quaking humans.

But Jesus names Simon's response differently and offers another possibility. Simon is not conventionally pious but wrongfully fearful. Simon does not embrace the fullness; he wants it to go away. This is hardly what Jesus wants. So he instructs Simon not to be afraid. Instead, he is to use what he has experienced to bring others to the same experience. As Jesus caught him, he is to catch others. Forget fear, it is time for adventure. So when they brought this fullness (their boats) to shore, when they moved out of the deep waters of abundance, they left everything they used to do and dedicated themselves to catching men and women for God. Jesus is saying to them that if you want to do this work, you've just received all the preparation you need. The method will be the same: trust over calculation, love more than power, risk, instead of security.

When Peter saw the power, freedom, and life that Jesus offered, he was ready to let go of everything he was sure of for what he was not yet sure of. And this is a story that is of course repeated in our world today, in our own lives. We seem to be culturally defined by the pursuit of security. That's just who we are. To question that pursuit in any way is threatening. To let go of security is one of the greatest risks that can be asked of people. How difficult it is for people to leave their comfort zone or their self-image in order to go onto a new path.

Given what we are facing in our world, in our church, and in our own diocese today, could today's gospel story be asking this question of us: "If we are willing to be changed from within, if we are willing to leave our comfort zones and go on a new path, if the church is willing to be changed from within and risk doing things in new and different ways, will our nets burst and overflow in abundance? Could this be the good news for us in today's gospel? Forget fear, it's time for adventure!" ***

Listen again to today's story as it is re-told by John Shea, a present day storyteller and theologian:

It is known by everyone who cares to know that the Lord Jesus and St. Peter used to retire to the local tavern after a hard day of ministry to break bread and drink wine together.

On a certain rainy night St. Peter turned to the Lord Jesus and grinned, "We're doing real good."

"We?" asked the Lord Jesus.

Peter was silent. "Alright, you're doing real good," he finally said.

"Me?" asked the Lord Jesus.

Peter pondered a second time. "Alright, God's doing real good," he finally admitted.

But the Lord Jesus saw how reluctant St. Peter was to admit the source of all goodness. He laughed and hit the table with his fist.

It was the laugh that got to St. Peter. He pushed his face toward Jesus and blurted out, "Look! I was somebody before you came along. You didn't make me. I know everybody says, 'There goes the Lord Jesus and his sidekick St. Peter. Jesus cures them and Peter picks them up.' But it wasn't always that way. People knew me in my own right. I was respected and looked up to. They would say, 'There goes Peter, the greatest fisherman in all of Galilee.'"



Jesus: "I heard that you were a very good fisherman, Peter," said the Lord Jesus who was always quick to praise.

"You're damn right I was. And tomorrow I am going to prove it. We are going fishing, and you will see how other fishermen respect me and look to my lead."

Jesus: "I would love to go fishing, Peter. I have never been fishing," said the Lord Jesus who was always looking for new adventures. Jesus: "But what will we do with all the fish we are going to catch?"

"Well," Peter smiled the smile of the fox. "We'll eat a few, store the rest, wait till there is a shortage, then put them on the market at top dollar and turn a big profit."

"Oh," said the Lord Jesus, who had that puzzled and pained look on his face that Peter had often observed, as if something that had never crossed his mind just made a forced entry. Peter wondered how someone as obviously intelligent as Jesus, could be so slow in some matters.

The next morning at dawn the Lord Jesus and St. Peter were down at the shore readying their boat. And it was just as St. Peter had said. When the other fishermen saw Peter, they sidled over. "Going out, Peter?" they asked.

"Yeah," answered Peter, not looking up from the nets.

"Mind if we come along?"

"Why not?" shrugged Peter, pretending to be bothered by them. When they left, he glared over at the Lord Jesus and said, "See!"

St. Peter's boat led the way. The Lord Jesus was in the prow hanging on tightly for he was deeply afraid of the water. Now St. Peter was a scientist of a fisherman. He tasted the water, scanned the sky, peered down into the lake, pointed off to the side, and gave the word in a whisper: "Over there."

Jesus: (loudly) "Why isn't anyone talking?" asked the Lord Jesus in a voice much too loud for the quiet work of snaring fish.

"Shhhh!" Peter put his finger to his lips and glared at the Lord Jesus. The boats formed a wide circle around the area Peter had pointed to. "Let down the nets," Peter's voice crept over the surface of the water.

Jesus: (loudly) "Why don't they just toss them in?" blurted out the Lord Jesus, who had hopes of learning about fishing.

A second "SHHHH!" came from St. Peter.

The fishermen let down their nets and then began to pull them in. But something was wrong. The muscles of their arms did not tighten under the weight of fish. The nets rose quickly; the arms of the men were slack. All they caught was water.

The fishermen rowed their boats over to St. Peter. They were a chorus of anger. "The greatest fisherman in all of Galilee, my grandmother's bald head! You brought us all the way out here for nothing. We've wasted the best hours of the hours of the day and we have nothing to show for it."



And they rowed toward the shore shouting curses over their shoulder.

The Lord Jesus said nothing.

St. Peter tried a second time. He checked the nets, scanned the sky, tasted the sea, and peered into the depths. At long last he looked at the Lord Jesus and, pointing out into the sea, said, "Over there!"

No sooner had he said, "Over there!" than the Lord Jesus was at the oars, rowing mightily, the muscles of his back straining with each pull.

And all day long under the searing sun the Lord Jesus and St. Peter rowed from place to place on the Sea of Galilee. And all day long, under the searing sun, they let down their nets. And all day long, under the searing sun, they hauled in their nets. And all day long, under the searing sun, they caught nothing.

Evening fell and an exhausted St. Peter raised the tattered sail to make for shore. The weary Lord Jesus sat in the prow, a look of anticipation on his face.

It was then, as the boat glided toward shore, that it happened. All the fish in the Sea of Galilee came to the surface. They leapt on one side of the boat and they leapt on the other side of the boat. They leapt behind the boat and they leapt in front of the boat. They formed a cordon around the boat, escorting it toward shore in full fanfare.

Then in a mass suicide of fish, they began to leap into the boat. They landed in the lap of the laughing Lord Jesus. They smacked the astonished St. Peter in the face. When the boat arrived at shore, it was brimming, creaking, sinking under the weight of the fish.

All the other fishermen were waiting. They gathered around St. Peter and slapped him on the back. "Peter, you scoundrel! You knew where the fish were all the time and never let on." They hit him on the shoulder. "Peter, you rogue!" You put us on. You are surely the greatest fisherman in all of Galilee."

But St. Peter was uncharacteristically silent. He only said, "Give the fish to everyone. Tonight, no home in this village will go without food." After that, he said nothing.

But later that evening, at the tavern with bread and wine between them, Peter looked across the table at the Lord Jesus and said, "Go away from me. I wanted the fish to be over them, not with them. I wanted the fish to rule them, not feed them. You go away from me. I am a sinful man." But Jesus smiled, not the smile of the fox, but the smile that moves the sun and the stars. And he had no intention of going away.

There were other fish to catch.



My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself,
And the fact that I think I am following
your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.
And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing.
And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore will I trust you always
though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death,
I will not fear, for you are ever with me
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.
- thomas merton

