

February 6, 2022  
Year C, Epiphany V  
Luke 5:1-11

## Breaking “Bad” Nets

A sermon offered by Rev. Rachel Knuth

I.

You may have heard about these scientists who just returned from Antarctica, where they were exploring the ice shelves and measuring sea temperatures. On their expedition, the scientists aboard the ship RV Polarstern were taking their usual photographs on the ocean floor. They expected to see a few icefish nests. Icefish are these weird looking fish that have clear blood, their hearts are actually white, as a way to adapt to the cold water. They lay their eggs in little groups of nests, at the most maybe 5 nests clumped together. But the scientists didn't expect what happened next. When they dropped their cameras down this time, they didn't find 5 or 10 icefish nests near each other— they didn't find 50 or 100 —or 500,000 or a million— they discovered about 60 million icefish nests in this deep cold water! Who even knew these strange translucent fish were so prolific! Amazing!

It's a good thing the crew aboard the RV Polarstern didn't cast their nets down, or they might have sunk their boat trying to haul in all those fish. Which is kind of what happens in our story for today.

We begin at the shores of Lake Gen-NES-ah-ret, which is the ancient name for the Sea of Galilee. The fishermen have their boats docked and are cleaning their nets from a long night of catching... well, nothing. I think it's safe to imagine they are exhausted and annoyed— all that work and nothing to show for it. How will they feed their families if they can't catch any fish? In the context of this culture, fish mean life. So when they come up empty it's a sign that something isn't going quite right.

Simon Peter, tired but going about his business, is maybe looking out of the corner of his eye at a crowd of people hovering around Jesus— what are they even doing here, up so early in the morning? He wonders if they've heard about how Jesus healed his own mother-in-law. He sees them pressing in to hear what Jesus will say next. Maybe they want to know “what is it in this man's words” that can heal a person? That's when Simon Peter suddenly notices Jesus clambering into his boat, asking him to push away from the shore. Perhaps feeling the intensity of the crowd, Simon Peter agrees.

But then Simon Peter is asked by Jesus to go out into deeper water and try to fish some more. And I have to pause with an aside to say, Jesus is bold! Have you ever met a person who fishes for their livelihood? I don't know, but if they've been out there in the cold wind on the ocean all day setting

crab pots, or diving for abalone, or out on an ocean vessel— There is no way I would tell one of those dudes, at the end of a shift, to take me back out and try lowering their nets again. But that is just what Jesus does here. It's a pretty salty request, and somehow Simon Peter reluctantly agrees. And then— then, they bring in a huge haul of fish— so big it strains their nets to the point of breaking, so heavy it can nearly sink two boats— it's almost too much to bring to shore.

And we know what happens next: Simon Peter just crumples. He is so amazed he says, “Go away from me, for I am a sinner.” But Jesus does not go away, he says, “Be not afraid. From now on you will be catching people.” So Simon Peter, James and John, leave their nets and follow Jesus.

We are in the Season of Epiphany. So we know this story appears as a way of guiding us toward God's Light, as it is revealed in the ordinary stuff of life. What is the good news we can bring home to our lives from this story?

## II.

There are all kinds of beautiful metaphors here, maybe you love them too— the crowd, the boats, deep water, being up all night, abundance, breaking nets, the miracle of fish, following Jesus. I love the rich imagery in this text. But many within Christianity have chosen to emphasize the line “from now on you will be catching people.” And this view has caused harm as Christians have gone out to evangelize others around the world. Making the Christian mission to “catch people” sounds like a form of evangelism-by-entrapment, like Christians should be lurking with nets to catch unsuspecting people of other faiths or no faith, and bring them to Jesus. I'd argue that's no way to create meaningful discipleship. But it is one interpretation that Christians have gleaned from this text.

No, I'd rather stay with the emotional exchange between Simon Peter and Jesus— when Simon Peter says “Go away from me, for I am a sinner.” Something perplexing is going on. What we see here are two different kinds of pushing away: the push Simon Peter makes when he tells Jesus to Go Away. And the push Jesus makes when he pushes the boat away from shore. What can we learn about healthy relationships from these two different kinds of pushes?

## III.

We humans have this dilemma sometimes, because we have a need for emotional closeness. But we also get this feeling of aversion when there's too much of it. Humans get stressed out when there's too much closeness, so we try to create a little distance— often by stirring up a conflict or pulling in

someone else to help relieve the tension. Sometimes we try geographic distance as a way to make space in a relationship. This might look like moving far away from family and thinking that it makes us more grown-up, only to find out when we visit home that all the same patterns are still there, and we're not actually any better at handling them. When we're at our best, we are able to come close to one another while being fully our selves at the same time. Basically, when we're managing ourselves well, we don't run away or push others away. We stay connected.

So when Simon Peter says "Go away from me, for I am a sinner," it's an emotionally "anxious push." Maybe he just doesn't quite know how to stay connected without feeling overwhelmed? Maybe he thinks he will feel more like an individual if he has physical distance from Jesus? But I have a hunch that shame is also part of it: Simon Peter believes that the mistakes he's made and the brokenness that lives inside him can't be close to the sacredness of Jesus. I wonder when each of us in our own lives have felt overwhelmed by our pain and pushed someone away, like Simon Peter does. When we feel that way it can help to lift our pain in prayer, to let our hearts break open before God.

And while we may have our share of struggles, it can also help to look around our lives and find the nets filled with fish. By that I mean, to give thanks for simple things. This week around the church I observed so many nets of fish bursting at the seams— so much abundance— I noticed the care one of our church members showed by taking a friend with dementia to the beach; wonderful people painted my office; volunteers answered phones and practiced music and planned worship. But really I witnessed you as you recognized God's sustenance— you shared a photo of seven redwood siblings you can see from your house, you gave thanks for a baby born healthy and safe, you were relieved by a conversation you were worried about that went well. What I'm saying is that we are a community that savors God's sustaining Love, we are a community that shares gratitude. And I'm convinced that sharing our brokenness with God, paired with practicing gratitude, can be an antidote to some of the anxiety that causes disconnection with God and each other in our families, our church, and our world. So this week I invite you to share your feelings of hurt and pain with God, and then... Well then just be on the lookout for ways that God is providing strength and nourishment to you. God's abundance is all around us, like 60 million icefish nests settled on the sea floor in Antarctica.

And as gobsmackingly awesome as 60 million icefish nests sounds, what's also astonishing is why they think the icefish are congregating in this certain area of Antarctica. The scientists are pretty sure they know: The exact spot where all these icefish were discovered is an area where cold water pushes down to the sea floor and forces warmer water to come up. Actually it is the very place where

the entire earth's ocean circulation pattern begins. The way our oceans move and have their patterns depends upon this push of cold water down to the sea floor. It's a healthy kind of a push, it's a push that creates movement and life.

Jesus knows how to make a push like that, a push that creates movement and life. He pushes off from the shore in the boat. If Simon Peter's was an "anxious push," then I think we could call this a "perspective push." It's one that allows Jesus emotional distance from the crowd. We all know how helpful it can be, when we are too close to a situation, to get a little perspective. Jesus models how to do this in a healthy way— he isn't being cruel or manipulative, he's just creating some space so that he can offer his teaching as best he can. What Jesus does here is so very wise and compassionate. He embraces Simon Peter with all his flaws and stays connected to him even when he lashes out.

And you can tell Jesus is calm and loose about it, because when Simon Peter anxiously tells him to Go Away, Jesus is unfazed and playfully says, "Don't worry, now you'll be catching people." It's kind of a funny moment— I mean, what kind of consolation is it for a fisherman to catch human beings?! There's an easy way about Jesus, where he uses his perspective and a little gentle ribbing to defuse Simon Peter's anxiety.

So there is good news standing right in front of Simon Peter— it's the good news of God's sustaining Love that isn't afraid to come close to suffering. It's the good news that comes to the weary who have been up all night and feel ashamed of who they are and what they've done. It's the good news of perspective and playfulness. And this good news is not only for him, it's for James and John, the sons of Zebedee. It's for the crowds of people standing next to a huge pile of fish on the shore, probably enough to feed them all and have enough left over to sell. Jesus doesn't leave anyone without sustenance.

IV.

Maybe it's ok for us as a church, not to focus all our attention on catching people. Maybe we are not to walk away from our work the way these disciples leave everything behind. Rather, perhaps we are to use our ordinary lives to shine Jesus' real presence in the life of the world. To be God's sustaining grace with and for each other. Amen.