

Luke 5:1-11 —The Miraculous Catch of Fish

(Matthew 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20)

1 One day, as Jesus was preaching on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, great crowds pressed in on him to hear the word of God. 2 He noticed two boats at the edge of the lake. The fishermen had left them and were washing their nets. 3 Jesus got into the boat belonging to Simon and asked him to put out a little from shore. And sitting down, he taught the people from the boat.

4 When Jesus had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”

5 “Master,” Simon replied, “we have worked hard all night without catching anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.” 6 When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to tear. 7 So they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

8 When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees, and exclaimed, “Master, leave my boat, because I’m a sinful person.” 9 For he and his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, 10 and so were his partners James and John, the sons of Zebedee.

“Do not be afraid,” Jesus said to Simon. “From now on you will catch men.” 11 And when they had brought their boats ashore, they left everything and followed him.

Footnotes

1 Draws on the NLT rendering

8 Draws on the Weymouth rendering

This story presents us with a conundrum: Luke’s report is very different from the other two Synoptic accounts. In Matthew and Mark, the men are still fishing, not out of their boats and washing their nets after a long catch-less night.

Furthermore, Matthew and Mark make no mention of the miraculous catch of

fish. Are the “fishers of men” and “at once they left their nets and followed him” references enough to conclude these are the same incidents? Or must we parse these as separate events?

Ellicott opts for “a slight presumption” that these are separate callings: “We may infer that while our Lord went by Himself to preach the gospel of the kingdom to ‘the other cities,’ the disciples returned, as they did after the Resurrection, to their old manner of life, and were now called again to their higher work.”

Jamieson-Fausset-Brown takes a decisive stand for the three being separate events: “That these calls were all distinct and progressive, seems quite plain.” That commentary places the first call in John 1:35-42 (though there is no “follow me” language there), identifies Matthew 4:18-22 as a second calling, then asserts that Luke’s account is “their third and last before their appointment to the apostleship.”

A reader, however, might feel driven to treat Matthew and Mark’s accounts as the same incident, because they are virtually identical, but different from Luke’s because they say Jesus finds Simon and Andrew “casting a net into the sea.” Luke clearly says the brothers had left their boat and were washing their nets. In addition, Luke records Simon arguing with Jesus about putting out into the deeper water and dropping their nets, saying that they had “worked hard all night without catching anything.” (v.5)

On the other hand, in all three accounts Jesus says he will teach them to fish for men and the Text says they immediately left to follow Jesus. Yet, as Ellicott points out, there is nothing in the Text to preclude the possibility that Matthew and Mark record an encounter in which the men followed Jesus that day to hear his teaching and then returned to their livelihoods. However, Luke’s far more dramatic and detailed story – and the discrepancy about whether they were still fishing or had quit after a long night – practically force one to conclude that he records a different encounter in which the men make a permanent decision to follow Jesus. One should note that Luke closely follows this anecdote with Jesus naming his apostles. (6:12-16)

We do leave room for the fact that first-century storytelling doesn’t follow the rules of professional modern reporting, but the differences noted above make it

impossible to see the Matthew/Mark story as recording the same incident as this one in Luke.

vv.1-3

The Sea of Galilee measures about 12 by 8 miles and reaches a maximum depth of about 140 feet. While the lake is fed partly by underground springs, its main source is the Jordan River. Situated 680 feet below sea level, the lake is surrounded by low, rolling hills. The lakeshore provided “an excellent, acoustically serviceable amphitheater.” (Expositor’s)

Jesus leveraged the acoustics to preach to the large crowd that was following him. Because Jesus “was accessible and welcoming to the needy, sick, and socially outcast,” many people were trying to touch him, in hopes of being healed. (Utley)

Jesus looked about and noticed two boats nearby, one of which belonged to his friend Simon. He climbed into the boat and asked Simon to push out a bit from shore. Now Jesus’ voice would be amplified by the water – and he had a platform for teaching that kept him from being mobbed.

vv.4-5

“Put out into deep water” — Like so many others that morning, Simon had been entranced by Jesus’ profound teaching. How deep his admiration of Jesus was growing. But that bubble was burst in an instant when this carpenter-turned-rabbi told him to go fishing!

Peter knew so much about fishing that Jesus obviously didn’t understand. First, it was the wrong time of day. The reason they fished at night was because fish moved into the deepest water once the sun came up. Besides that, they fished with a dragnet, which couldn’t reach into the deep water. And on top of that, they had spent the entire night fishing with no results. (Filament)

“But because you say so” — Simon, true to form, informed the carpenter of the facts, yet he did what Jesus commanded. After all, his mother-in-law’s healing defied the facts of her situation!

vv.6-7

“Their nets began to tear” — Jesus never would have claimed to be an expert fisherman, but he was, after all, “God's agent of creation and Spirit-filled Messiah!” (Utley) Simon’s crew cried out for help from their partners in the other boat, whom v.10 reveals to be James, John, and their father, Zebedee. Yet even with their help, the catch of fish was so dramatically great that both boats were on the verge of foundering.

Benson offers a pastoral encouragement at this point:

Observe, reader, we must not presently quit the callings in which we are engaged, because we have not the success in them which we promised ourselves. The ministers of the gospel in particular must continue to let down their nets, though they have, perhaps, toiled long, and caught nothing. They must persevere unwearied in their labours, though they see not the success of them. And in this they must have an eye to the word of Christ, and a dependance thereupon.

vv.8-9

“Depart from me ... a sinful man” — The men in both ships were astonished by the miracle and the power of Jesus to make it happen. And Simon was as quick to speak now as he had been when Jesus told them to take another fishing run out on the lake. He cried out: “Master, leave my boat, because I’m a sinful person.”

Awed by the superhuman power of Jesus, Simon’s own sinfulness and unworthiness overwhelms him. We are reminded of Isaiah’s experience when he saw the Lord on his throne and cried out, “I am ruined, because I am a man of unclean lips.” (Isaiah 6:1-5) One might also think of the lepers of Simon’s day who were required to preserve the ritual cleanliness of others by warning them they were themselves unclean. He pleads with Jesus to leave.

Vaughan’s insight is gripping: “It is an unspeakable comfort to know that this awful prayer, which Peter made in ignorance, was not answered. Christ did not depart from him. Thank God, He knows when to refuse a prayer.”

v.10b

“Do not be afraid” — Not only did Jesus not leave, but he “spoke words of comfort and ... dealt kindly with Peter's fear and agitated spirit.” (Shepherd's)

“You will catch men” — Peter hears the call of Christ that becomes the call of any who would follow Jesus in discipleship. Jesus draws a spiritual analogy between fishing and seeking people for the Kingdom of God. (Filament) He calls Peter to become a different kind of fisherman: one who would catch people, rather than fish. (Shepherd's)

Uteley draws a remarkable connection here with God's determination to find and restore his people, expressed as “I will send for many fishermen, declares the LORD, and they will catch them.” (Jeremiah 16:16)

As Simon took fish alive in his net, so he will take men alive and bring them truly alive. Edgar notes: “When souls are taken in the gospel net, they are taken ... to enjoy life abundantly. In truth, the greatest kindness we can confer on souls is to get them into the net. We never live in earnest till we have been brought to him who is the Life of men.”

v.11

“Left everything” — The two pair of brothers leave everything: their boats, their torn and unwashed nets, even the miraculous catch, which Zebedee and his workers would have to process.

The sacrifice was significant. For one thing, their culture highly valued loyalty to family and clan. (Filament) One top of that, “Fishermen made a better-than-average income ... so leaving their job is an act of radical commitment that they would expect to adversely affect them economically.”¹

In this we see the total commitment Jesus requires as a condition of discipleship: “Any one of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.” (14:33) For Simon to give up his business and follow Jesus could not have been easy, “but his experience with Jesus brought him to the point of commitment. He cut his ties with the past. From now on he would follow Jesus.” (Shepherd's)

Peter and the others leave with Jesus, not knowing what sort of future lies ahead. Perhaps they dream of thrones the Messiah would give them. They certainly had no idea of the hardship, persecution, and even death they would experience. But no disciple of Jesus ever knows what future their decision will entail. As Edgar said, "At death, if not before, we are all asked if we can forsake all to follow Christ into undiscovered lands. May we all stand that test!"

Maclaren, however, encourages us that "Christ's command ever includes His promise. Work done for Him is never resultless. True, His most faithful servants have often to say, if they look at their few sheaves with the eye of sense, 'I have spent my strength for nought.' ... If the great Sower, when He went forth to sow, expected but a fourth part of the seed to fall into good ground, His servants need look for no larger results. But still it remains true that honest, earnest work for Jesus, wisely planned and prayerfully carried out with self-oblivion and self-surrender, will not be unblessed."

1 Bible Background Commentary, <https://www.ivpress.com/ivp-bible-background-commentary-set>