

Early Days with Jesus
Put Out into the Deep
Luke 5: 1-11

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**January 17, AD 2021
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

One morning, during the first days of Jesus' ministry, he was teaching by the Sea of Galilee. As the listening crowd grew, people began to press in upon Jesus. Jesus needed a better vantage point for speaking. He saw two boats tied near shore and recognized one of the owners, named Simon, whom Jesus later would rename as Peter. Simon was busy cleaning his fishing nets. Jesus got into a boat and asked Simon to ease it out a bit onto the lake. There, the crowds could see him and Jesus could breathe.

When he was finished, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep, and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing. But at your word I will let down the nets."

So, these fishermen went against their professional instincts. They made for deep water and threw in their nets. Suddenly, they caught so many fish that the nets began to break! Simon called for his partners in the other boat. But even with two boats, the weight of all those fish began to sink the vessels.

Can a fisherman ever have too many fish? It was the kind of catch Simon might have dreamed about years ago when, as a sleepy boy, he tried to stay awake during the long nights while his father taught him the trade. But in this moment, Simon didn't care a thing for the fish. The boat was sinking and, with it, his means of a livelihood. Yet, even that wasn't his main worry. Simon fell down before Jesus. Water and fish swirled around him. He said: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."

The miracle of the great catch opened up for Simon a sense of wonder. In a profound way, he realized the power and immediate presence of God. But this wondrous sight was followed by a striking awareness of unworthiness. Simon had a sudden gasp of realization, "If this is the Lord before me, I am not worthy, and I am in a lot of trouble!" The miracle became a horror. Just as God drew near, crashing in on an ordinary moment, Simon acutely felt his own sinfulness. He cried out to get some distance between himself and this holy presence.

If our reference point is merely other people, we may have a fairly rosy view of ourselves. We prop each other up in the delusion that we're generally OK because we fall within the range of what normal people are like. In fact, we may never even think about such things as "righteousness" or "sinfulness." These are words we seldom use in contemporary culture. Our ideas of living a good life come from looking around us at others, rather than "upward" toward any transcendent standard. So we live in a fog about who we really are. But should the reality of God invade our normal lives, we suddenly realize that there has been a much higher expectation upon us than we ever admitted. In the face of such brilliance, we feel hopelessly dull. Before such power, we feel pathetically weak. Before such *thick* reality, we feel thin and hardly alive. To use more spiritual terms, before such holiness, we feel acutely the reality of our sin and separation from God. No wonder people avoid God! His light ferrets out all our dark places. Of course, we instinctively want to avoid such uncomfortable exposure. Like Simon, we say "Depart from me!"

Yes, God offers us forgiveness, joy and intimacy. But in doing so, he demands a relentless honesty from us. He calls us out from delusion. He jerks our attention up from limp comparisons with our peers to see that God is the one with whom we have to deal.

He asks us to summon the courage to see ourselves as we really are from the perspective of the one who designed us. Simon had to fall on his face desiring nothing but relief from the relentless pressure of God's holy presence before he could be ready to receive the calling Jesus had for him. We hate to admit the reality that there is such a thing as sin committed in thought and deed before a righteous God. But here is the relentless truth. There is no reconnecting with God-- our Father who loves us-- without realizing and admitting our sinfulness. Not just our brokenness, our weariness, or our loneliness, but also our *wrongness*. We have to be willing to put out into the deep waters. There, beyond the comfortable shores of our daily routine, God brings the truth to us. Out of the depths comes the reality of our plight. We are helpless before God. We have not lived even according to what light we had. No excuses will help us. We are not victims. We are perpetrators. We are desperately wicked. And in dire need of mercy, we cannot earn, steal, or scam. When we are honest enough to own this, we are in just the position where God will meet us.

Do Not Be Afraid

Jesus neither confirmed nor denied Simon's admission that, "I am a sinful man." Simon, after all, was not telling Jesus something he didn't know! Rather,

seeing Simon at the point of raw, honest need, Jesus spoke right through Simon's fear: "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men." The effect of those words was to say, "I know who you are and I have something for you to do; do not fear what you are not; I will make you into something more." Jesus accepted his confession. Jesus acted as if he himself had the authority to forgive sins and, in fact, had already done so. His very presence was an absolution. The miracle had brought Simon to his knees; Jesus lifted him up with a word of assurance: *Do not be afraid*. Just that quickly, the moment of horror was ended. The past was swept away and a new future was opening.

Casting nets for fish was finished. Could Simon have fished again after this great haul anyway? His life's work had been filled up and overflowed so magnificently that any future pursuit of mere fish would have seemed trivial. Now, Jesus asked Simon to go fishing for *people*. He wanted help from Simon and the others. Their new task would be to drop nets in a broken world whose people needed to be hauled into Jesus' healing presence. It almost goes without saying that, when they brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed Jesus.

The Drama of Transformation

What happened to Simon followed a pattern of God's dealings with us. Indeed, we see that something similar had happened centuries earlier. In the sixth chapter of the book of Isaiah, we read how the prophet had a vision of the throne of God. As he realized what he saw, his wonder immediately became dismay. Isaiah cried out: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" He saw the pure glory of God and felt how unclean he was. But just as in Simon's story, God immediately responded to a deep, honest confession with healing forgiveness. In the next moment, one of the heavenly creatures around the throne flew down to Isaiah and touched his lips with a fiery coal. He declared: "Behold this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin is atoned for."

Right after such a "Fear not," there came a call to a particular task. Isaiah heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Isaiah replied, "Here am I! Send me." This process moved Isaiah, as it did Simon, through awe to unworthiness to acceptance of a mission. Each was taken out of fear by a declaration of forgiveness, followed by a request for service. Their response to such a dramatic calling was one of complete commitment.

The very same drama may be played out, though often in subtler ways, in our lives today. Many people have undergone a season of transformation at some stage in their lives. It may not be recognized until years later. But, upon reflection, the pattern is clear: There was a growing awareness of God's reality in conjunction with a personal crisis. When the storm passed, there occurred a renewed commitment and deeper connection to God. Perhaps we can line out this process in an example:

Suppose you have been “plying your trade upon the seas.” You've been living your life, working out things the best you can. You haven't been particularly interested in religion. It was part of your life as a child, but hasn't meant much recently. God may seem the right thing for sweet innocents, but none of them would understand the things you have thought and done. The idea of active faith seems too legalistic, too concerned with petty righteousness. You can't imagine yourself being a Bible-toting, hymn-singing, evangelistic, holy person. That would never do. You'd just as soon leave God alone if he'll leave you alone.

As the years have passed, though, more questions eat at you. Maybe it's because work has not turned out to be all you hoped. Maybe it's because the good life has meant more stress than happiness. Maybe it's just because you don't sleep like you used to. For whatever reason, you find you resonate with Simon, who had gone fishing all night but caught nothing. You've dropped your nets, hauled them in over and over, and there's nothing to show for it but a cranky mood and a tired body.

But then, the next day, there seems to be a subtle suggestion in your mind. Why don't you go ahead and go to church a couple of times? At least the family will be pleased. Or, why don't you go ahead and see the counselor? Let some of those feelings out; it can't hurt. Why not just talk with your spouse about how you're feeling? With so much water under the bridge now, there's nothing to lose. These hints toward looking up beyond yourself seem all very benign in the beginning. A tiny growl of spiritual hunger nudges you just a little way.

At first, it works out fine. It feels good to be at church. Talking an hour a week with the counselor eases the stress. Talking more with your mate has made everything easier at home. This bit of spirituality seems a better way to live.

But then, one day, there's another suggestion inside your mind that's a little more outrageous. “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” Think

about the life that you live and know so well from a different point of view. What if it wasn't just about what you want and need, but about what God wants from you? What if you unfolded your nets, just let them down and took a look at what you've been living for all these years? Could you be bold enough to ask what you've been longing for in all these pursuits? Just unravel your nets in the deep and see what happens.

Suddenly, there might be a great haul of fish in the nets. It may be in church, or in the counselor's office, or over dinner with your spouse, or lying awake on your bed. But, quite dramatically, it dawns upon you: "There's more to life than what I have been seeing. There *is* a God. And God makes a claim on my life."

Perhaps, at the very same moment, you get a clearer view of yourself. The scales fall off your eyes. It is horrible. "I've been living for me. I've been curved in on myself all these years and it makes me sick. All the love lost! All the betrayals by neglect as much as anything! The blindness! I'm a mess that can't be fixed. I've got to close all these thoughts up and get out of here." Your boat is sinking.

But then, if you are blessed, just as soon as the horror of self-knowledge is embraced, there comes another feeling of presence. A gentle voice that speaks from the depths of the soul, even from the depths of the universe: "It's all right. Do not be afraid. I know who you are. Forgiveness is mine to grant. I'm not here to destroy your life. I'm here to remake it." It feels like death at first, but then there is new life. The Isaiah passage echoes within you: "See, this coal upon your lips makes them clean. I remove your sins."

The sudden apprehension of God's reality creates a new and devastatingly realistic knowledge of self. You perceive a horrible gap between yourself and God. Immediately into the admitted breach, though, God pours love and forgiveness. There is an intuition that your Father knows fully who you are and loves you anyway. Beneath the crisis of the meaning of life, whatever form it takes, God gives a sense that all is well and you are kept in love. Jesus lifts you out of the sinking boat.

But there always is one more act in the play. The sense of God's claim comes again, not to undo you with unworthiness, but to rouse you to a higher calling. "Whom shall I send?" the Lord asked. Isaiah responded with all his heart: "Here am I. Send me." Jesus said, "From now on you will be catching people." And when they got to shore, they left everything and followed him. In contemporary language, your response may be, "OK, I'm yours. I'll live as your

child; I want what you want more than anything. I need your love that much. I will serve you.”

The New Occupation

Such a commitment may occur gradually over time, or in a burst of devotion. Either way, from the time we become consciously aware of Jesus’ calling, our ordinary life ceases more and more to occupy center stage. We live for something deeper and higher. The work we do, we know now, could be burst through with such a fulfillment that it would make us quake. All that we strive for, which we used to think was so important to our happiness, could be fulfilled in a moment and we would count it worth nothing in the face of our Father God’s love and forgiveness.

The tugs and ambitions we feel pale in comparison to the call of Jesus to follow him and go fishing for people. We discover that life is about being transformed by Jesus’ love, and then going to offer that love to others. This new activity of fishing for people may or may not be externally different from our current daily work. The key change is in the perspective from which we view people and tasks. We live now with a new sense of purpose in life: We are to be channels of God’s love. We have a mission. It lights up everything.