

**Sinking the Boats**  
**By Reverend Litton Logan**  
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**Scriptures:**

**Luke 5:1-11**

<sup>5</sup>Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, <sup>2</sup>he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. <sup>3</sup>He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. <sup>4</sup>When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.' <sup>5</sup>Simon answered, 'Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.'<sup>6</sup>When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. <sup>7</sup>So they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. <sup>8</sup>But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!' <sup>9</sup>For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; <sup>10</sup>and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.'<sup>11</sup>When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him. (NRSV)

**Introduction:**

A man was stopped by a game-warden leaving Cochiti Lake Park recently with a bucket full of fish. The game warden asked the man, "Do you have a license to catch those fish?" The man replied, "No, sir. These are my pet fish." "Pet fish?!" the warden inquired. "Yes, sir. Every night I take these fish down to the lake and let them swim around for a while. I whistle and they jump back into their bucket, and I take'em home." "That's a bunch of bologna! Fish can't do that!" said the warden in disbelief. The man looked at the game warden for a moment and then said, "Here, I'll show you. It really works." "O.K. I've GOT to see this!" The game warden stated. The man poured the fish into the lake and stood and waited. After several minutes, the game warden turned to the man and said, "Well?" "Well, what?" the man responded. "When are you going to call them back?" the game warden prompted. "Call who back?" the man asked. "The FISH," the warden said sternly. "What fish?" the man asked.

**Sermon:**

In our scriptures, this morning we've heard Luke's account of Jesus' first volunteer disciple - Peter, and subsequently James and John. Prior to this time, Jesus had gone about the Galilean countryside healing, exorcising unclean spirits, and teaching by himself.

After being rejected in his hometown of Nazareth, Jesus had moved down to Capernaum on the shore of the Sea of Galilee or Gennesaret in our text. The Sea of Galilee is not a sea but a fresh water lake formed along the course of the river Jordan. Capernaum became Jesus'

base of operations, but he also spent a lot of his ministry in other fishing villages and towns around this lake. Something about fishing and fishing people that is hard to resist.

When we hear this story, we tend to image one of those pretty scenes from an illustrated coffee-table bible. I believe such modern romanticisms and acculturations along with some New Testament scholars portraying Peter and the other fishermen as independent owner-operator, commercial fishermen distorts and defrauds scripture.

My research indicates that Peter, his father, and his fishing partners would not have been "middle class" educated, boat-owning, businessmen any more than any other peasant would have been who owned working livestock, such as oxen. Therefore, let us see Peter and the other disciples in our texts this morning as subsistence-level, peasant fishermen. They may have been a little more prosperous than others, but not well off by anyone's standards, ancient or modern.

Many of the Galilean fishermen formed family cooperatives or partnerships with other families, all of which were embedded in an oppressive socio-economic-religious structure controlled by the Romans and the Herodians, the Jewish puppet rulers.

Fishermen, fishing cooperatives, or syndicated fishing enterprises bid for fishing leases on the Sea of Galilee usually from the Herodian government. Often these syndicated entities also owned the fish processing plants and distribution networks. Fisherman could either use their own boats or boats owned by the wealthy or syndicated leases to fish. In addition, most of these fishermen would have been under contract to deliver a certain weight of fish to the processors. This could be an important point in our text this morning.

Fish were preserved by pickling or salting and then sold and distributed through brokerages or directly to markets. Fresh fish was a luxury and available only to those near the water or who could afford rapid deliveries. Also, we know from various ancient sources that commercial fishing along the Sea of Galilee was very hard work, highly competitive and regulated by the Roman and Herodian governments, heavily taxed, well policed, and benefited primarily the elite and wealthy at the expense of the fisherman.

In our story, something that would have stood out like a sore thumb even to Luke's urban audiences, not to mention Jesus' audiences, was that these soon-to-be disciples initially appear to be responsible men, but then they take leave of their senses by taking a leave of absence to follow Jesus. For people of this era and social strata to leave the family, especially a family business to go traipsing about the countryside with some no-repute, Galilean holy man was very dishonorable, boarding on the demonic.

I also want to point out something else that is very important. We get no idea that there was anything special about Peter and the other fishermen that would have warranted Jesus picking them to be his disciples. We have no indications that they were leaders in their local synagogue or even attended synagogue regularly. Given what we may gather from ancient sources, these Galilean fishermen would have been considered vulgar, coarse, uncouth, and definitely not prophetic material.

In short, these men did not become Jesus' disciples because of their preexisting religious qualifications or as Peter indicates in his confession, their pious character. Primarily their qualifications seem to be that they were Jewish men, members of an oppressed peasantry, and discontented with the religious-economic-political status quo and felt drawn to Jesus and his message about the kingdom of God. We can only imagine that these men longed for, hoped for the coming of the kingdom of God, when all would be put right and made just. I imagine Jesus' authority as a broker and change agent for the kingdom of God was cemented in these men's minds by the unusual catch of fish that he had directed.

I want to point out again that in Luke's Gospel Jesus does not issue a specific call to Peter, James, and John, as he will to later disciples. Also, their voluntary response to a holy encounter did not happen in a temple or a synagogue, but in a fishermen's hard, dirty, stinky work-a-day world. Thus, my point about romanticizing and modern acculturations of scripture. I want us to see that the holy permeates every aspect of the human condition, even the meanest of situations, among all types of people, and often comes unpredictably and definitely unmerited.

Something happened in these men when they heard Jesus teaching that made them alter their life priorities, dropping everything to live their lives according to Jesus' teachings and commission.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, fishing is used metaphorically for gathering people for divine judgment (Amos 4:2; Hab. 1:14-15; Jer. 16:16). In the gospels, however, the call to become "fishers of men" or "fishers of people" becomes a call to gather people in to the kingdom of God, not merely round everyone up for judgment.

I've gone a bit afield, so let's review the highlights of the story: Jesus' reputation has preceded him to Capernaum, although he did no healing or exorcisms in our story today. It was early morning, the optimum time for a teacher to catch a crowd, especially men, in a fishing community. The crowd pressed in upon Jesus to the point that he asked Peter for the use of a boat to take him out from the shore so he could continue his teaching. After he was through teaching, which we can safely assume was about the kingdom of God and kingdom citizenship, he told Peter and his partners to push out into the deeper water and let down their nets. Was Jesus thinking about compensating Peter for the use of the boat or trying to impress him for some other reason?

Remember, as the story opened, Peter and the rest of the fishermen were cleaning their nets - removing the accumulated crud after a fruitless night on the water. This unsuccessful night of fishing could have had serious, may be even disastrous, implications for these guys in fulfilling their contracted quotas.

Peter addressed Jesus as Master, a title of respect for a teacher, telling him that they have fished all night and have caught nothing. Let me point out a little something about fish. Many fish come up from the deep water at night to feed near the surface, especially during bright phases of the moon, because refracted sunlight makes it difficult for fish to see the smaller, food fish that may live in the shallows and feed near the surface in daylight. Therefore, Jesus' command was doubly confusing - they didn't catch anything during the prime time of night or the early morning hours, so they were not likely to catch anything during the day. What did this in-country Galilean know about fishing?

Nonetheless, Peter and his crew in deference to a teacher-holy-man put out and dropped their nets. As they trolled their trammel nets, they ensnared such a quantity of fish that the catch began to break their nets, so they called for help from other cooperative members. Even with help, the catch threatened to sink the boats.

Now, you've got to remember this is a fishing story, so we can expect some exaggerations. However, an interesting point: in 1986, an ancient fishing vessel was found buried in the mud along the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. This boat is believed to be typical of the boats mentioned in our scriptures this morning. The Galilee boat, as it is called, was 26.5 feet long, 7.5 feet wide, and 4.5 feet deep and could either be rowed or sailed, carrying a crew of 5 and a pay load of about a ton.<sup>1</sup> So, when we read that the boats were in

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<sup>1</sup> Wachsmann, Shelley. "The Galilee Boat-2,000 Year Old Hull Recovered Intact." Biblical Archaeology Review 14:5, September/October 1988.

danger of sinking because of the quantity of fish caught, we get a better sense of the impact of the story on Luke's audience and maybe, just maybe, on ours.

Peter, my favorite of all the apostles, because he, like me, tends to open his mouth before engaging his brain, said something very strange - 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!' In other words, "Sir, please leave, you don't want to have anything to do with the likes of me. I miss the mark in being what I ought to be according to God's will and ways so often and so badly that there is no hope for me." Jesus saw the holy terror on Peter's face and told him not to be afraid, because he was to become a fisher of people - implying he too would be an agent for gathering people into the kingdom of God.

Taking some liberties, I think we can see that in this moment of terrifying self-awareness, Peter was made ready to follow Jesus. In that moment, he saw who and what he was, and sensed who and what Jesus was. Also, in that moment Jesus saw in Peter an honest, open, and receptive spirit without any social or religious pretensions. Peter was just what Jesus needed and wanted in a disciple. However, the natural inclination, when one feels accepted by the holy, is to want more and to share it. Peter drops everything and follows Jesus.

I invite us this morning to see in our text the reality of the holy moving beyond coffee-table bibles, churches, temples, or synagogues into the most mundane of human experiences; to the most unworthy, and what can happen when they respond to the Good News of Jesus Christ. Such an encounter, I believe, causes people to see themselves as Peter did, but also like Peter they experience and understand that following the holy ways of Jesus are the only viable ways to be truly human and have a truly purposeful life. Many hear, many see, many follow, but sadly, many do not and they and the world are worse for it.

In chapter 9 of Luke's Gospel, we will see Jesus sending out the full complement of his disciples to heal and proclaim the Good News of the kingdom of God to others. His disciples are people drawn from, by the standards of the day, the most disreputable sectors of society.

My dear friends, none of us were ever good enough or qualified to merit our life-changing encounters with the holy. It came upon us either by someone else's design or by chance. We responded because we experienced the compelling lure of the holy and knew innately its importance and promise for our lives.

Our call to God in Christ came to us where we were, as who we were, and showed us at a very fundamental level who we really were, but also who we could be; what we could do in our lives if we embraced the ways of the Christ. Along with that life-changing encounter, we incurred a commission to become kingdom change agents and gather others, like ourselves, into the kingdom of God.

We are to go out into the world and declare the Good News of God to all people no matter who they are, where they are, or what they do. We are to do this knowing that if we are successful it will undermine the oppressive policies and unethical practices of the powers that be because the kingdom of God and its holy imperatives are not of this world. In addition, as our scriptures this morning tell us, this catch we are sent to gather in will eventually sink the power structures and systems of this world that dominate, oppress, and victimize, giving rise to a better way - the kingdom of God on earth.

So, let's all pitch in, call on our partners, our brothers and sisters, in the Christ cooperative of whatever stripe to lend a helping hand, and let's try to sink the corrupt and sin laden boats of this world. All we need are just a few more fish.

And, don't dare say, "What fish?"

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