Jesus Calls His First Disciples
Luke 5:1-11
Epiphany 5, Year C February 9, 2025
Choptank Charge Pastor Nan Duerling

Welcome, friends. We're glad to see you this morning! Today, we continue our study of Luke by turning to the story of Jesus calling his first disciples, found in chapter 5, verses 1-11. Here we find Jesus standing at the Sea of Galilee, which is also known as Lake Gennesaret (*gen' ne sa ret*). Recall that Jesus has been teaching throughout the region of Galilee. Everywhere he went, except to his hometown of Nazareth, he was well received. It's not surprising, then, that crowds would be "pressing in on him" so as to hear him better (5:1).

To improve the acoustics, Jesus got into Simon's boat and asked him to move out a bit from the shoreline. Jesus and Simon already knew one another, since we read in chapter 4, verse 38-39, that he had been to Simon's home, where he healed the fisherman's mother-in-law, who then served them lunch. We might note that Simon must have had a wife, but we never hear of her. Perhaps he was a widower.

We have to give Simon a lot of credit for taking Jesus out in his boat. He was in the midst of washing his nets when Jesus called him, which tells us that he has been out fishing. We can assume that he is exhausted from this work. In fact, we learn in verse 5 that Simon and his colleagues had been out all night, but their nets had come up empty. They must have been very disheartened because he and his partners, James and John, earned their living as fisherman. No fish in the nets means that they have no money for their day's expenses.

We don't know just how long Jesus stayed in the boat teaching, but we do know that, when he finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water, and let down your nets for a catch" (5:4). Simon, the professional fisherman, listened to Jesus, the carpenter, and despite obvious misgivings, did what Jesus said to do.

Soon, there was such an abundance of fish in the nets that they were bursting. The catch was so heavy that Simon called for James and John to come over in their boat to help him. Astonishingly, the catch was so huge that both boats were filled. They must have been well over-capacity, since they were starting to sink.

I wonder how we would have responded to this amazing catch. I'm honestly not sure what I would have done. But Simon's response indicated that he recognized there was something very special about Jesus. During this fifth week of Epiphany, Jesus' identity is further revealed to us. Simon (now referred to as Simon Peter in verse 8) fell to his knees and said, "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!" He was keenly aware that he was in the presence of holiness.

Sensing Simon Peter's fear, Jesus said, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people" (5:10). The response of Simon, James, and John—and we assume Simon's brother Andrew, though he is not mentioned by name here (but see 6:11)—was to leave everything to follow Jesus (5:11). These men were "all in." They would give up everything to follow one who so clearly distinguished himself as someone sent from God. He taught and healed and cast out demons and provided an enormous catch of fish, all of which were actions that nobody but God's anointed one could do.

Jesus called these first disciples to follow him. According to Luke's account, they left the life they had known behind them, but had no idea what the future held for them. Yet, they responded to his call without hesitation. We may think that such "all in" action could only occur when Jesus walked the earth. But there are examples, including this one with which you might be familiar, that clearly demonstrate that when God calls people answer. And their voices are not just a weak "yoo hoo." No, they respond with the courage needed to fish for people, even those who would likely be very difficult to reel in for

Jesus.

> Nate Saint and fellow missionaries Jim Elliot, Ed McCully, Pete Fleming, and Roger Youderian had set up camp on a little sandbar in hopes of making contact with the primitive Aucas, known for their fierce infighting and hatred of outsiders. The five missionaries had a deep burden to share the gospel message with a South American people known only for hunting and killing. Their first friendly contact ended in death by spearing.
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> Why didn't the missionaries defend themselves with their guns? Why did they leave five young women widowed, nine children fatherless?
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> Less than three years after the massacre, Rachel Saint (Nate's sister) and Jim Elliot's widow, Elisabeth, were living with the tribe. They practiced basic medicine and began to write out their language in hopes of someday translating the Bible. But why would they do it?
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> Even the Aucas did not understand what happened on that little beach in January of 1956. As they repeatedly discussed the raid, one question haunted them: why hadn't the missionaries used their guns to defend themselves? Two of the Indians had been wounded. But the Aucas were certain that the superficial wounds were unintended, since one was hit only after his mother grabbed a missionary's arms and the other knew no one saw where she was hiding.
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> These wounds, actual evidence that the missionaries were capable of defending themselves and chose not to, were a major factor in the Aucas agreeing to allow Rachel Saint and Elisabeth Elliot to live with them. The killers had to know: why would the outsiders let themselves be killed rather than kill, as any normal Auca would have done?

This excerpt comes from *Christianity Today Magazine,* (Vol. 40, No. 10, Page 20, 1996). If you'd like to read a fuller account of how these missionaries answered God's call, you are welcome to borrow my copy of Elisabeth Elliot's book, *The Shadow of the Almighty: The Life and Testament of Jim Elliot.*

These missionaries to Ecuador certainly understood the risks they were taking to serve Christ and bring the Aucas into the family of God. We know from the Bible and traditions of church history that Jesus' disciples also took great risks, and some, like these missionaries, paid the ultimate price for their efforts. Let me be clear: I don't think that God expects each one of us to be death-defying disciples. But I do think we are expected to listen for calls on our lives and respond as God asks us to. Such a call may require that you step into a leadership position in the church. You might be asked to answer a call by working with an individual or small group that needs the kind of help that you have the gifts and graces to offer. Perhaps an elderly family member or neighbor needs assistance. Or maybe a young child needs tutoring in a subject your know well. Maybe God will call you to work with an organization that cares for those in need, like the Cold Weather Shelter. The possibilities are endless. But you have to keep your eyes, ears, and heart open to hear and heed these calls.

So how do we do that? I think Luke 5 gives us an important clue. Remember that when Simon Peter told Jesus that he and his associates had been working all night with nothing to show for their efforts, Jesus directed him to "put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch" (5:4). Shallow water wasn't the place to find fish. Even after working hard all night, there were no fish to be had in the shallow waters.

But the deep water, now that was a different situation. The fish were incredibly abundant there. But Simon and company had to be told to go to these deep waters. When they did, they were overwhelmed by their catch. What, then, might "deep water" refer to in biblical terms?

It's been suggested that "deep water" as it is referred to in Luke 5, symbolizes a call to move out in new and uncharted waters of ministry. We likely won't be able to see what lies at the bottom of these waters, so we will need insight to understand what we're dealing with. This description certainly reflects

what happened to the newly-minted disciples. They really had no idea what Jesus would expect or ask of them. They could only step out in faith and trust that what they needed to know or do would be revealed to them. As they stepped into "deeper water," they were being challenged to deepen their faith by relying more and more on God.

Okay. Let's be honest. When our faith is shallow and we are unwilling or unable to trust in God completely, we may be quite happy to stay where we are. We'd prefer to be in the shallow end of the pool, as it were, at a place where we can easily get ourselves out if there are signs of trouble. Going to the deep end of the pool, however, puts us in unfamiliar territory, perhaps even very dangerous territory if we are not strong swimmers. We may not be ready to take a leap of faith that requires us to trust completely in Jesus and take him at his word. But when we are ready to do that, our faith can grow and blossom. There will still be unknowns, of course, hidden in the depths of the sea, but we can rest assured that God is with us and will guide us, even when we've lost our bearings.

One other point we can consider in this story is Simon's recognition that he was a sinful person. I wonder how often we are able to take a hard look at ourselves and see the person who is staring back at us in the mirror. Am I authentic and accurate in my assessment of myself? Do I say, "well, I haven't committed any violent crimes, nor do I act with malice toward anyone, therefore, my sins aren't *that* bad"? Maybe not. But have you assessed your willingness to follow what Jesus calls the great commandment (Matthew 22:37-39)?

> You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus' words, which he quotes from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, push us to evaluate how we interact with our neighbors—all of our neighbors, not just the ones who are nearby, and not just the ones we like or who agree with us.

The prophet Micah also gives us words by which we can measure our willingness to act as God's people (6:8):

> He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?

Acting with justice, kindness, and humility before God and neighbor also plunges us down into deep water. Shallow people are more interested in revenge, getting their own way, and cruelty, which is usually directed toward people who are in some way not like them. The shallow folks are concerned with getting as much wealth, status, and power as possible, no matter who is hurt in the process. Disciples who are comfortable in the deep water are able to accept the challenge of swimming in the spiritual depths, the places where Christ-like actions speak far louder than pious words or attendance at worship services. Such folks recognize the importance of justice for all people, kindness toward all who are created in the image of God, and humility before the Father, whose nature is to be, "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6).

I imagine some of you will be quick to point out that what I'm suggesting is not the way the world works. You may agree that it is biblically on target, but think it's not the way real people act. And, truth be told, you are probably right. The problem, however, is that Jesus and his followers are here to model an alternative, countercultural way of being. We are to be living by the standards of the kingdom of God, not those of this world. Admittedly, Jesus expects a great deal of his disciples. But we need to remember that he called a variety of people, none of who were well-connected, well-educated, or well anything else. They were apparently selected because Jesus saw something in them that he felt he could shape into the type of person he needed to fulfill his Great Commission. We too are called to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20). The good news is that we don't jump

into the deep end of the pool on our own. Jesus is with us now and always. So, let's be his faithful disciples and go out to make disciples in his name!

Love, Nan