

Sounds Fishy to Me
Third Sunday after Epiphany
Season of Reconciliation
January 22, 2017
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Text: Matthew 4:12-23

Matthew 4: Jesus calls his disciples by saying: ‘I will make you fishers of people.’ Well, I hope you’ve noticed how that theme of fish and fishing has been reflected in the liturgy today? That lovely Call to Worship: “This Little Fish of Mine” – one of my favorites!; the sentences from the prophet Isaiah – “the people who walked in darkness have gone fishing” – our processional hymn: “Arise, your fishing gear has come!” – stirring imagery! And really all of the songs thus far: “I Want to Walk as a Child Who can Fish” – and then that beautiful Psalm, “The Lord is My Fishing Instructor and My Salvation” – beautiful! I trust that you have been inspired!

Now, of course, what this really points out is that there is actually no reference at all in the liturgy thus far to fish and fishing, and as we continue on after this sermon you will not find any fish liturgy there either. So far the liturgy has not been about fish but about light – “This Little Light of Mine” - arising to greet the light of God - walking as a child of the light. And that’s partly because it is the Season of Epiphany, the season of light - the light of God to us and to all – but it’s also because the image of light is very much in the scripture passages for today: the prophet Isaiah – ‘light shining to those in darkness’; Psalm 27 – ‘the LORD is my light’; and in Matthew, the Isaiah passage is reflected onto Jesus as a fulfillment of God’s promise, God’s light dawning. Lots of light – and then in Matthew, some fishers and fish too. But you will be hard pressed to find a fish song anywhere in those hymnals we have or anywhere else – we looked! – the only one I know is from childhood: “I will make you fishers of men...”, which I’m not going to start singing because it will get stuck in my head, or yours... Light -a popular image in Scripture; fish and fishing -not so much.

And I have to acknowledge this reflects my personal preference of light over fish – given my druthers, I would just ignore the part of the passage in which Jesus offers the call: “I will make you fishers of people” – I don’t like the image. And in fact I discovered this week, that in my 30ish years of preaching I cannot find a single sermon on this “fishers of people” story – it’s in Matthew and Mark and Luke, and I haven’t touched it in any of those places – not once. That’s no accident, given my dislike for the image - but it does bother me a little, since I think I’m supposed to like what Jesus says – ‘avoid disagreeing with Jesus’ is one of those things they teach you in Seminary.

That’s been my conundrum with this passage - for the last 30 years - for this last week. But then my colleague Pastor Jill saved the day. I told her on Tuesday that I was determined to preach on this terrible image (always an inspiring attitude to start from!), and after first expressing some good pastoral empathy for my feelings, she shared a very interesting commentary with me on this passage – and when I read that article, my sermon was all set – thanks Pastor Jill! So here’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to tell you why I don’t like what Jesus is saying in this passage; then I’m going to tell you another way to think about what Jesus is saying here (that’s the piece from Pastor Jill); and then, not surprisingly, I’m going to talk about light.

Typically this story, this fishing image, is heard as a story about evangelism – evangelism understood as followers of Jesus going out to get more followers of Jesus. How it goes is that these disciples are told to put aside their unimportant jobs as fishermen, because now they are called to the holy work of getting more people to follow Jesus. And if YOU are going to be holy (which you are supposed to want to be!), then that is what you will do too: follow the call of Jesus to cast your net to catch more Christians too – ready to go fishing?!

I know this image bothers me partly because all I can think of is fishing hooks and nets – not good - but the image bothers me theologically too. Leaving aside if that kind of evangelism is what Jesus meant with this image then, I do have an issue with that kind of evangelism now. Going out to get more people in as the primary call of faith places the church on a troublesome

path – a path that leads to a wall: a faith that is about who is in or out, good or bad, for us or against us. Over time such a faith makes the church into a place that presents itself as the right place, the only place, to be – in our net; so we better keep on fishing to get more of those wrong people out there made right. It is a script deeply imbedded in Christianity, but it needs to be set aside.

What? – we don't want people to believe in God? don't want them to follow Jesus? – how can I be against that? But that's the wrong question – the real question is: how in our time are we to follow Jesus? – and it simply doesn't fit in our world to use the image of God on our side, getting everyone into our net. Our Christian history has too much complicity with unfaithful paths; our world has too much complexity of how people experience faith; our world requires connection and compassion in ways beyond counting the fish in our net.

A different image is needed to guide us than getting people into the right net. So, instead, how about the image of...fishing! Consider this as a different way to understand this story of Jesus calling his disciples and following him to be fishers of people. Turns out being a fisherman wasn't so easy back then – not because it was hard work, which it was – but because it had become part of the system of oppression from the Roman Empire. Scholars tell us that King Herod was using those Galilee fishermen to line his pockets – with the catch no longer used as needed food for the locals, but sent away to make money for Herod. Simon and Peter and Andrew were dealing with an oppressive structure that trapped them in a cycle of injustice. Jesus sees them: 'follow me, and I will make you fish for people' – Jesus sees James and John at their boats and calls them - and they all leave and follow. Well, what might that call and that following mean now? A call of freedom from the nets they are caught in; a call to fish for a different way of life; a call that casts a net to encompass real life for all people: to go out to the poor and powerless; to challenge the privileged and powerful – as the commentary that Pastor Jill gave me says: 'turns out there are some BIG fish to catch out there, if justice is to be brought about' – and that's what Jesus calls them to.

Well that's interesting! – puts that whole fishing thing in a whole new light, you could say! I mean, I can't say it's ever going to be my favorite image, but it challenges me not to be stuck on my own assumptions of what something means and listen for new currents of meaning. And if you're skeptical at all about that fishing image as a call to freedom and justice – which maybe I've wondered too if it is some exegetical gymnastics – look at the context of the passage, about light! Isaiah's words of light in darkness, light from God dawning, are spoken to people in captivity and oppression – Isaiah's concern, God's concern, is not for saving their souls but for their freedom and well-being. That is the image of light that shapes this story of the fish and fishers – a call to join with a God who brings the light of freedom and justice to those in despair. With Matthew using Isaiah as the setting for this fish story, suddenly it seems that understanding this call story as a message of freedom and justice is really the only way to read this fish story at all.

And to top it all off, as someone who has always loved the image of light, not fishers – turns out the fish story makes me rethink the light too. I mean, light is nice, isn't it? Light is luminous and warm and inviting – the light of God, of faith – light is passive, but you can come to us! come to the light! – here we are! The light helps me – and you're welcome to come and share in it.

Or...what about a different view of light: light is bright – light exposes and reveals what has been unseen or hidden – light reveals and exposes me – my own complicity in injustice. Light is active, it is brought out to find and guide and examine – light goes to the darkness, light comes to places that are in need of it. This is a light that is not mild – but a light that is kinetic and piercing; , not a light that is white a light - but that is black and brown and rainbow, across the spectrums seen and unseen. It's kind of fun, freeing, challenging, costly to realize all that is present in this image of light - once you go fishing for a little more in the image. Jesus is the light of the world, and the world is out there, not in here – we can receive an image of light that calls us into God's world to meet God's light dawning.

When we get to the closing hymn in our liturgy, it's no surprise that you won't find any fish images in it - and I don't expect any fish songs to be written soon; and of course it DOES have a light image, about night to day. But really it expresses something of what drawing together those images of light and fishers speaks to us as our calling from our Lord Jesus, in our lives - we will sing: 'go to the world to renew life's worth, to live out God's grace, to struggle, bless and pray, as we follow Christ's own way.' And now, when I sat that sounds fishy to me - that's a good thing!

Thanks be to God. AMEN.