

Luke 5:1-11

1 Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, 2 he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. 3 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. 4 When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." 5 Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." 6 When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. 7 So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. 8 But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" 9 For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; 10 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." 11 When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

I'm guessing we can all agree that to be struck dumb and senseless and to have your cities emptied out and your lands made desolate are all bad things. But, as we learn in Isaiah, that's what it took for the people of Judah to finally listen to the words of the prophet, repent, and be offered a new beginning.

Likewise, to be knocked down and blinded is something that none of us would find desirable; but, as we read in 1 Corinthians, that's what it took for Saul, who was so sure that he was right in persecuting Christ's followers, to finally encounter Christ for himself. He was completely changed. From that point on, he was no longer Saul, the persecutor: he became Paul—the apostle who spread the gospel to the Gentiles, and whose words continue to inspire us today.

Each of our passages suggests that we have to be plunged into some kind of chaos before we're open to a new way of life.

That includes our Gospel reading. Here, in Luke, Jesus is still at the start of his public ministry, and so far, what he's been spreading is turmoil. Last week's reading was his sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth, where, first, they loved him for proclaiming that God's promise of justice and freedom were finally coming true—but then, they hated him when he upended their social structure by suggesting that God offered those same promises to people outside their fold.

After they chased him out, he went to Capernaum, where he preached and cast out a demon from a man in the synagogue, healed Simon's mother-in-law and many others. But then, as his fame and acclaim grew, he left a sure thing to go off to other unknown towns.

That's where we catch up with him, today. He's come to Lake Gennesaret, which is Luke's name for the Sea of Galilee. That lake was a heavily traveled commercial route with constant, open movement between Gentile territories and Jewish territories; a place where the social borders couldn't be controlled; and here, he encounters Simon, washing his nets after a failed night of fishing.

It must have been a pretty dull night, waiting out there for nothing to happen, because when Jesus gets into Simon's boat and asks him to push out away from the

shore, Simon doesn't even question him. He jumps right up and shoves back out; and there, from the open water, Jesus teaches the crowd who are gathered at the shore.

We don't get a word about the content—just that Jesus teaches them. But then, he turns to Simon and tells him to go out farther, to the deep water, and start fishing again. That's when Simon finally opens his mouth, because, now, Jesus is talking about a subject he knows something about. “We've already tried that,” he informs Jesus, “and it didn't work. But if you say so, I'll throw out my nets.” I have a hunch he was waiting for an “I told you so,” moment; but instead, with his nets in the deep water, he begins pulling in a catch so great that it threatens to sink both his boat and another one that comes to help. I can only imagine the mayhem on board, as Simon and the others scramble to stay afloat.

In Sunday School today, the children were studying the creation story. Do you remember how it starts? “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”

Deep water was where everything began—a formless chaos outside of human control; but the Spirit of God was moving over the face of that water, bringing forth light and life and abundance. From the deep waters.

And that's where that catch of fish came from—the deep waters. When all the tried-and-true methods of a seasoned fisherman failed, casting into untested, uncharted depths yielded an abundance he'd never seen before.

Simon is so stunned that he falls to his knees in fear. He feels inadequate to living into this way of life that's beyond his understanding; but Jesus reassures him:

“Don't be afraid; from now on, you will be catching people.” With the evidence of that huge haul of fish, and with Jesus' promise to them, both Simon and his partners leave their nets behind and follow Jesus on the way.

Now, we Presbyterians aren't big on chaos. Our hallmark is that phrase from scripture: “Decently and in good order.” And in that sense, I'm a very good Presbyterian—I love organization. I just spent part of my Friday putting my spices in alphabetical order, because, what are we—animals?! But our readings today push back against that desire to have everything compartmentalized and controlled, telling us that, if we truly want new life with new abundance, we have to learn to wade into the chaos.

And we might as well, because the chaos isn't going away any time soon. For decades, now, the mainline churches have been declining, and our response has been to keep doing the same things harder, expecting that the old order would eventually reassert itself. Guess what: that hasn't worked!

And the global climate has been sending out distress signals for years, yet we've kept living the same way, assuming that the extremes we were experiencing were just temporary blips. Guess what? Rather than going away, the changes have accelerated.

And politically, the parties have been touting the same kinds of platforms and offering the same kinds of solutions that have fallen short for generations; but rather than continuing to accept those halfway measures, people at both ends of the spectrum seem poised, now, for an uprising. Chaos is upon us, like it or not.

Chaos, in itself, isn't good news—because when the old ways come crashing down around us, people get hurt. But within the fear and uncertainty of these times is that reminder from scripture: that when everything seems like a formless chaos, the Spirit of God is moving over the face of the deep; working to bring forth something new and unforeseen. A new creation. The question for us, then, becomes: how do *we* respond?

In Isaiah, the people dug in their heels and refused to heed God's call to change. It took having their land in ruins and themselves in exile for generations before they would repent and get on board with God's new vision.

In Luke, we see a different story. Simon and his partners seem drawn to Jesus, but afraid that they can't live up. Once Jesus reassures them, however, they follow

right away. Rather than fighting the changes that Jesus announces, they choose to become partners in bringing it about. And how will they do that? By becoming “fishers of people.”

We’ve tended to read that phrase, “fishers of people,” as a call to evangelism. Certainly, Jesus does preach messages that lead toward evangelism, but this isn’t one of them. “Fishers of people” is a phrase straight from the prophets Jeremiah (16:16) and Amos (4:2) and Ezekiel (29:4), where they speak of catching and exposing those who oppress the poor and exploit the powerless.¹ So, Jesus is inviting Simon and his cohort to help bring about his vision of a world in which there is good news for the poor, liberty for the captives, recovery of sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and economic jubilee for everyone. In other words: an entirely different kind of order.

That’s Jesus’ invitation to us, too: to become his partners in bringing about that new and just world; but we can’t get to that new world without upending the one we’re in.

So, how do we do that? I have to admit that I’m not much of a sailor, I’m terrible at fishing, and I’ve never much liked to swim; but the deep waters seem to be where we have to go. That means speaking up against injustice even if we’re not sure it

¹ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), p. 132.

will make a difference. It means reaching out, even if we're not sure that anyone will take our hand. It means building bridges even if they lead to places that scare us.

The good news is that, a congregation, you're not strangers to any of those things. That's part of what attracted me here. I think about you opening your doors to homeless women back in 1983. I'm sure there was a lot of fear about that—about the difficulties you might face, about behavioral issues you might run into—but you took a deep breath and did it anyway. I'm guessing you made a lot of mistakes as you were getting started—maybe you even had some second thoughts—but you kept going. For seventeen years you kept going in this building, before the shelter finally outgrew your space, and it seems like, from the stories I've heard, having that shelter really made you the church you are, today.

And you continue to take risks like that. The Turquoise Table, for example. You went ahead with it without knowing for sure what the outcome would be, and there are some things, still, to be figured out—but you stepped into the unknown in order to continue to live out your mission of welcome.

And you're poised to do more, as you lay the groundwork for opening this sanctuary as a safe space for whoever might want to gather here during the

daytime. Will there be unforeseen consequences? I'm sure there will be. But I'm also sure there will be unforeseen blessings.

“Put out into the deep water,” Jesus said. The deep water is dark and murky and scary. But that’s where the Spirit is moving. And when we choose to move with the Spirit and embrace the chaos, the new life that comes our way brings abundance so great that we can hardly contain it.