

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 7, 2021**

**TRAVELS WITH JESUS:
FOLLOW ME**

Luke 5:1-11

You could classify this portion of Scripture in Luke 5 as a “fish story,” but it is different from so many other fish stories in that this one is really true. It is not a tall tale. Luke, who was not only a physician but a meticulous historian, is telling a true story. He is not making it up, or embellishing the truth, as in so many fish stories. This really happened.

Do you like to fish? I know some of you do. It has never been my thing. I imagine some of you, though, would gladly wear a T-shirt that says: “I fish, therefore I am.” If Descartes, the famous philosopher (and Christian) had been a fisherman, instead of *Cogito, ergo sum*, he might have written *Piscare, ergo sum* (“I fish, therefore I am”). I think there may have been a good market for such T-shirts around the Sea of Galilee, if some enterprising entrepreneur had taken advantage of it!

Simon Peter was a professional fisherman, along with his brother Andrew (who is not mentioned here), as well as James and John the sons of Zebedee. They made their living out on the Sea of Galilee (aka the Lake of Gennesaret, as Luke calls it in verse 1). They knew the ins-and-outs of the fishing trade. They knew the best places to catch fish and the best time to go fishing (at night, not during the day). They knew how to use huge dragnets to catch the most fish. They were professionals. Experts in the business.

But then, along comes Jesus. The fishermen return from their usual all-nighter out on the lake, during which they have caught exactly zero fish. It has been a totally fruitless night. I can appreciate the perspective of Warren Wiersbe, who says: “If I had fished all night and caught nothing, I would probably be *selling* my nets, not washing them to get ready to go out again! But true fishermen don’t quit” (Wiersbe, *Be Compassionate: Luke 1-13*, 49). Peter and his fellow fishermen are not quitters.

As they bring their boats into shore and go about the tedious daily routine of inspecting, mending, washing, and drying their nets to get them ready for the next night’s work, they see Jesus standing on the shore, with a crowd of eager listeners pressing around Him as He teaches them “the word of God” (5:1). His message, as we saw last Sunday in Luke 4:43, was “The good news of the kingdom of God.” His preaching, as we see here and on many other occasions, draws a packed crowd of listeners. Social-distancing wasn’t required back in those days, unless there happened to be someone with leprosy nearby.

Because of the press of the crowd, Jesus boards Simon Peter’s boat and uses it as His pulpit from which to teach the people the word of God. Simon Peter, as a result, becomes a captive audience, listening to Jesus talk while he tends to his nets. When Jesus wants to get a person’s attention, He can do it. He *will* do it. He will not force anyone to become a follower of His

against their will. He did not force Simon Peter to become His follower against Peter's will. That is not how Jesus operates. But He knows what to do to get a person's attention.

I trust – I hope, I pray – that Jesus has your attention. I pray that He has your attention today. Right now. I pray that you will give Him your attention every day of your life.

When He finishes the lesson for the day and dismisses the crowd, Jesus says to Peter: "Let's go fishing." Peter, being the expert fisherman, and being weary after a long and fruitless night out on the lake, thinks this is a nutty idea. It was not a secret that the best time and place to fish on the Sea of Galilee was at night in the shallow water, not in the deep water in the daytime. That was the conventional wisdom. Yet here is Jesus, who is not even a fisherman but a carpenter by trade and an itinerant teacher, telling Peter, a seasoned, experienced professional fisherman, how to do his job. Peter may have been thinking: "Who do you think you are? You're just a novice when it comes to fishing, and you want to tell me how to catch fish?" You can understand Peter's reticence, his reluctance, even his annoyance with Jesus, can't you?

For some reason, though, Peter agrees to do what Jesus suggests. Maybe Peter thinks it will teach Jesus a lesson! Maybe he thinks Jesus will see what a crazy idea it is, and Jesus will be less likely to "butt in" to areas of life He knows nothing about. (As if there is any area of life Jesus is not knowledgeable about, or where He is not sovereign!)

It doesn't turn out the way Peter expects, however. Instead of catching nothing, they catch more fish than they can handle in Peter's boat. In fact, the catch is so huge it swamps Peter's boat as well as the boat of James and John, who come to help. It's a miracle – literally! The two fishing boats are loaded with so many fish they can barely keep the boats from sinking. Suddenly, "all their fishes have come true!" (Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, 167).

This miraculous catch of fish produces two distinct responses from the fishermen. The first, as we see in verses 9 and 10, is astonishment. "(Peter) and all his companions were astonished" – they were amazed – "at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners."

The word Luke uses to describe this reaction, *thambos*, is used only three times in the New Testament, and it is Luke who uses it each time. In addition to verse 9, it is in Luke 4:36, as we saw last Sunday, where the people of Capernaum are amazed (*thambos*) at the authority of Jesus' teaching and His power to cast out demonic spirits. Luke also uses it in Acts 3:10, where he says that the people in the temple courts in Jerusalem were filled with *thambos* (amazement) when Peter healed a crippled beggar by the power of Jesus. Seeing this formerly-crippled man walking around, jumping, and praising God, the crowd in the temple, it says in *The Message*, "rubbed their eyes, astonished (*thambos*), scarcely believing what they were seeing" (Acts 3:10, *MSG*).

Thambos – amazement, astonishment at what had just taken place with this incredible haul of fish – was the first reaction of Peter and the other fishermen.

The second response – here the focus is squarely on Simon Peter – is a sense of terror. This demonstration of Jesus’ power produces trauma in Peter’s soul. Peter recognizes that there is something holy about Jesus. At this point Peter does not grasp the full identity of Jesus. But He does have an awareness of being in the presence of God. He recognizes the hand of God in the miracle Jesus has performed. He also sees in Jesus something of the holiness of God. He does not see it all clearly, but he sees enough to know that Jesus represents and reveals the holiness of God. In the light of that holiness, he sees his own *unholiness*. His own *sinfulness*. His own *depravity*. His own *unworthiness*. In the light of God’s holiness, he sees the *ugliness* of the stain of sin in his soul. He is under the conviction of sin.

Peter, by God’s grace, has come to a place to which you and I and every person must come in order to receive the gift of salvation. We must see ourselves as sinners who are unworthy to come into God’s presence, sinners who cannot save ourselves or do anything to commend ourselves to God. We must see ourselves as sinners who have no hope for salvation, no hope for reconciliation and peace with God, except in and through God’s sovereign mercy.

Is that how you see yourself? Unless or until you do, you will remain outside of the kingdom of God, cut off from the blessings of true fellowship with God, regardless of your record of church attendance, church leadership, or service to our country or community.

Confronted by the holiness and power of Jesus, Peter wants to run. Or, more precisely, he wants Jesus to leave. He wants Jesus to go away and leave him alone, because Peter knows he doesn’t measure up to God’s standard.

The point, of course, is that no one measures up to God’s standard. If measuring up were required of us, we would all be without hope.

But Jesus, in His grace, instead of condemning Peter or heeding his request to leave him alone, invites Peter into relationship with Him.

Keep in mind that this is not the first time Peter and Jesus have come into contact. Peter’s first encounter with Jesus is described in John 1 where, after John the Baptist introduces Andrew (Simon Peter’s brother) and another of John’s followers (probably John the brother of James) to Jesus, Andrew goes off to find Peter and brings him to meet Jesus. It is in this first encounter that Jesus gives Simon the name Peter, which means “The Rock” (John 1:29-42). In addition, as we saw last Sunday, Jesus has already been to the home of Simon Peter in Capernaum, where he healed Peter’s mother-in-law (Luke 4:38-39). So, this encounter at the Sea of Galilee was not Peter’s first exposure to Jesus. Which, when you think about it, may encourage us not to expect that a single exposure to the gospel will result in the salvation of a family member or friend or anyone you long to bring to Christ. A single exposure *may* result in a person’s salvation, but more often God uses multiple exposures to the message of the gospel in the process of bringing an unbeliever to faith in Christ. Which also means that God may want to use you in one or more of those exposures to Jesus that will bring others to saving faith. It is something to think about. And something to act on.

Jesus doesn't turn away from Peter. He doesn't turn Peter away. Instead, He calls Peter to a new life. He calls Peter to a new mission. He calls Peter to a new vocation. No longer is Peter to give his life to fishing for fish on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus invites him to become a new and different kind of fisherman – to “catch” men and women, girls and boys, young and old, rich and poor, educated or not, and eventually both Jews and non-Jews for the kingdom of God.

Fishing, of course, is a metaphor for the work of evangelism, for the God-given Great Commission to go and make disciples of people everywhere, in Kingstowne and Franconia and Rose Hill and Springfield and Burke and Annandale and Alexandria and Mount Vernon and Lorton and Fairfax and Fairfax Station and Arlington and Falls Church and wherever we live and work, even to the far corners of the earth. The word Jesus uses in His call to Peter is *zōgrein*, which means “to catch alive.” This kind of fishing results in life, not death. True, Jesus calls us to die to ourselves, and our selfish, sinful nature. But the life He gives us in our souls is unlike anything you can ever experience apart from Him. It is life in HD (high definition). It is life rooted in a love that is unchanging and unconditional. It is a grace-filled life, flowing from grace that comes free of charge to people like us who don't deserve it and never will. It is a life marked by repentance, forgiveness, faith, hope, love, grace, and peace, all rooted in the saving power and redeeming work of Jesus on the cross.

Do you have this life living in you? It is as available to you today as it was to Simon Peter, to Andrew, James and John, and the millions – billions – of people throughout history who have embraced the message of the gospel. You may feel like some sin in your life has disqualified you from the kingdom of God. But you are wrong. Jesus promises that He will never turn away anyone who comes to Him in true repentance and faith. Not Peter, not you, not me. No one. Remember John 6:37. Jesus says: “Whoever comes to me I will never cast out” (ESV). That includes you.

You won't find the words “Follow me” here in Luke 5. We do find these words in the call to Peter and Andrew in Matthew 4:19 and Mark 1:17. But the call is clearly implied here in Luke, because the result is the same. “They” – Peter, James, John, and Andrew – “pulled their boats up on shore, left everything” (nets, boats, the catch of a lifetime – *everything*) “and followed Him” (5:11). They left the fishing business in order to pursue a new vocation as disciples of Jesus.

Jesus doesn't call us all to leave our vocations, to quit our jobs, to sell our homes, in order to follow Him. In some cases, He does. More often, He wants us to remain where we are. He wants us to serve Him and His kingdom in our present position.

Wherever we are, whatever we do, whatever our vocation, God wants each of us to be about His business as we follow Him, as we represent Him, as we live out our faith and let our light shine for Him in this world.

I know this will make me seem really old (which is not far from the truth), but this is really timeless. Do you remember the movie *Sister Act* with Whoopi Goldberg? She plays a Las Vegas night-club singer hiding from the mob in a San Francisco convent where she takes on the identity of Sister Mary Clarence and directs a choir of nuns who are invited to sing for the

Pope. As Sister Mary Clarence, Goldberg would take popular songs from the 1960s and turn them into songs of love and devotion directed to God. (If you are so young that you have not seen or heard clips of the choir singing in the movie, please ask your parents to show you. Or, if you're old enough, check it out for yourself on YouTube.)

One of the songs the nuns sing is "I Will Follow Him." It was a hit song in 1963, made famous by a 15-year-old singer named (Little) Peggy March. Here are the lyrics sung by Whoopi Goldberg and the nuns:

I will follow Him
Follow Him wherever He may go
And near Him I always will be
For nothing can keep me away
He is my destiny.

I will follow Him
Ever since He touched my heart I knew
There isn't an ocean too deep
A mountain so high it can keep
Keep me away
Away from His love.

I love Him! I love Him! I love Him!
And where He goes
I'll follow! I'll follow! I'll follow!

I will follow Him
Follow Him wherever He may go
There isn't an ocean too deep
A mountain so high it can keep
Keep me away
Away from His love.

...

He'll always be my true love!
My true love! My true love!
From now until forever!
Forever! Forever!

I love Him! I love Him! I love Him!
And where He goes I'll follow!
I'll follow! I'll follow!

I will follow Him.

That is the song Jesus wants us to sing. It is the road Jesus wants us to travel. It is the way Jesus wants us to live.

He extends the same call to you and me that He extended to Peter and the other fishermen.

Are you following Him? Will you follow Him? Starting today? Right here, right now?

Don't turn Jesus away. Don't turn away from Him. Follow Him. Find your destiny in Him.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.