

Scripture Comments

Luke 5.1-11

Fish story

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Cary G. Speaker, D.Min.

We often refer to this story as the “calling” of the disciples. Jesus does not issue a call in this story. The story is not clear about what Simon understands the meaning to be of the phrase, “catching people” instead of fish. The story is not clear why Simon and the others follow Jesus. When we compare this “call” story with Matthew and Mark’s version of the call of the disciples, we get a very different slant. Matthew and Mark place this story very early in the Gospel, making it more remarkable because the background for their response to Jesus’ call is only a few general statements that Jesus has been preaching in Galilee. In Luke we read the incidents in Nazareth (4.16-30), an exorcism in Capernaum (4.31-37), the healing of Simon’s mother-in-law (4.38-39), many healings and exorcisms in Capernaum (4.40-41), Jesus continuing to preach (4.42-44) and such a growing popularity that the crowds are pressing in on him (5.1).

We can also compare this story from Luke with the parallel in John 21.1-23, which is a post-resurrection appearance. In both stories the focus is on Simon, even though other disciples are present. In Luke, the story so thoroughly centers on Simon that his partners are unnamed until the end of the story. James and John are named in verse 10, but Andrew, Peter’s brother is not.

Simon is described as obedient to Jesus’ word. When Jesus instructs Simon to put down his nets, Simon’s own reasoning tells him that this is a futile exercise. Nevertheless, Simon obeys. In similar fashion to Mary’s response to the angel Gabriel, when she reminds the angel that she cannot have a child and yet submits to God’s will (Luke 1.34, 38), Simon obeys what sounds to him like a ridiculous suggestion. Luke shows an affinity for this device. We will read specifically of Ananias (Acts 9.13-17), who knows that Paul is not to be trusted, yet follows God’s instruction anyway. The followers of Jesus are not expected to understand, but they are expected to obey.

Simon’s skill as a fisherman is not the issue; the issue is Simon’s sin as a human being unworthy to be in the presence of the Lord. Perhaps the miracle that is greater than the catch of fish is for Simon’s sin not to disqualify him for service. The same power that causes Simon to fall to his knees lifts him into Jesus’ service. But Simon is not lifted up as a better fisherman, rather, as one who will be catching people. The word translated as “catch” means “to take alive in the sense of rescuing from death.” The contrast is significant: Simon has been catching fish in order to take them out of their environment where they live and to turn them into food for people. His new catch is to be gathered for life and not for death.

When Jesus instructs Simon to let down his net, Simon’s response is to address Jesus with the title “Master.” This title is found only on the lips of the disciples and only in Luke. In the parallels with Mark and Matthew, the titles used are either “Teacher” or “Rabbi.” The word translated as “Master” carries the meanings of commander, administrator or supervisor. Clearly it intends someone with authority.

The “fish story” gets our attention but then slips out of focus. Suddenly Simon acquires the second name “Peter.” The Greek form of this name means “rock” or “rocky ground.” Simon Peter’s response to the great catch is fear and a desire to distance himself from Jesus. The story implies that the others are also amazed, but Jesus’ words are to Peter alone. We recognize Jesus’ first words as the angel’s refrain “Do not be afraid.”

The miracle of the catch of fish may remind some of us of Old Testament stories of Elisha and Elijah’s miraculous abundance. Clearly the lectionary writers expect us to connect Isaiah’s vision of heavenly splendor with this fish story. Isaiah’s response is to cry out, “Here am I; send me.” The parallel is clear. When we realize that we are standing in the presence of God, we fall down on our knees and cry to God, “I’ll do whatever you say.” The vast load of fish the disciples caught is included in the “everything” that the disciples leave in order to follow Jesus. Consider the result of leaving two overflowing boatloads of fish on the shore. In a few days, the stench would have been overwhelming. Luke portrays a radical unconcern for all possessions: boats, workers, mended nets, and the catch.

Perhaps the dominant theme of the story is the presence of God. Although the focus of the narrative is on Simon Peter, he is not the star of the show. Simon rightly recognizes Jesus, even when he does not fully understand who he is and what he will do. Simon’s plea for Jesus to “go away from me” is not because he has particular sins, but because he is simply human. Simon recognizes that the power of Jesus is God’s own power. When we are honest with ourselves, we remember the feeling of being so unworthy that even God, or especially God, would not want to be close to us. We believe ourselves to be so horrible that even God could not love us. We see in this story the beginning of a relationship between Jesus and Simon Peter that will grow into what will become the heart of the church.

References:

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