

It's A Miracle!

#1 - The Miraculous Catch of Fish

Luke 5:1-11

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I was having a good day on Friday. It was my day off, so I started off leisurely. Made some tea, did a little reading, took the dogs for a walk. I was winning at life. Then, Amy texted to say she was having a tough day at school and needed a reminder that God still loved her in the form of a lavender latte. I'm on it! I stopped by North Lime Coffee and Donuts to get the latte, then drove to her school to swoop in and save Amy's day.

As I was getting out of the car, I had the latte in one hand and went to close the door with the other, but accidentally got tangled in my seatbelt. As I tried to extricate myself, my hand slipped and the lavender latte, which was supposed to rescue my wife from her bad day, went flying. And just like that, we were both having bad days.

Has that ever happened to you? In one moment, you've got life figured out, and in the next moment, you're looking at a puddle of lavender latte on the parking lot asphalt and wondering if you should just climb back into bed. If you've ever felt that way, welcome to the life of Simon Peter, one of Jesus' disciples.

For Lent this year, we're going to take a closer look at Peter, who exhibits moments of exemplary faith followed immediately by moments of soul-crushing doubt. Peter, who walks on water but starts to sink when he doubts Jesus. Peter, who calls Jesus the Messiah but then scolds Jesus when he says he will be crucified. Peter, who swears his allegiance to Jesus at the Last Supper, only to deny knowing Jesus three times later that same evening. Peter is like a puppy dog: one minute he's the most loyal, loveable sidekick; the next, he's making a mess on your new carpet or chewing on your favorite shoe. If you've ever gone from high to low in the time it takes a cup of coffee to hit the concrete, your patron saint is Peter.

It starts at the moment Jesus sees Peter the fisherman and invites him to be a follower. Jesus was in the midst of his teaching ministry, and he was gaining some popularity. On this particular occasion, so many people came to hear him that there wasn't enough room on the shore for all of them. Luke says: "The crowd was pressing in on him to better hear the Word of God." I love that image. When we hear the word of God, are we reclining back, or are we pressing in to hear it?

To get some personal space, Jesus asks to use Peter's boat. Jesus had probably observed Peter earlier on the shore, who was cleaning up after a long night of fruitless fishing. After Jesus finishes speaking, he says to Peter, "Put out into deep water, and let down your nets for a catch." Now, if I'm Peter, frustrated, exhausted, I'm looking at this stranger, this carpenter from Nazareth, and I'm telling him exactly where he can put his nets. "Look, Jesus, you stick to building cabinets and leave the fishing to the experts."

After some mild balking, Peter obeys Jesus and heads out to the deep water. Now we need to pause here to recognize the significance of Jesus' command. Back in those days, people didn't know what was under the water. They didn't have sonar and submarines and snorkels. They believed that water was the residence of evil. Fishermen tended to hug the shoreline because it was safer. If a storm came, you didn't want to be caught out in the deep water. It wasn't safe. It was evil.

How would you respond to Jesus' command to go deeper, to leave the safety of the sand and head out into the deep water? For me, I really, really like staying close to the shore. I prefer not to get over my head. It's tempting, isn't, to stay in the shallow waters? In the shallow water, you can see the bottom. You know where you're stepping. The shallow water is safe.

But, as Jesus shows Peter, the shoreline is not where you're going to catch the big fish. When I was little, my PawPaw used to take me fishing at a local pay lake. He'd get my pole all ready, bait my hook with a worm, and then show me how to cast out into the middle of the lake. But every time, I would only cast the line about 10 feet in front of me so I could watch the bobber. He'd say, "You're not going to catch any fish there."

Well, a little bit later, that bobber dove under water and I pulled in a nice-sized bluegill. "See?" I told him, as if to say, "Leave the fishing to the experts." About a half hour later, as we were getting ready to go home, he reeled in his line from the middle of the lake and hauled in a catfish about twice as big as me. The deep water is where you catch the big fish.

If this story ended with the miraculous catch of fish, what we'd have would be an amazing tale of Jesus making life better for someone. But Jesus has bigger plans for Peter than just filling his nets. Jesus has just dumped this miracle flipping and flopping at Peter's feet, enough fish to provide for his family for months, and Peter realizes he's in the presence of the divine. "Go away from me, for I am a sinful man!" Like so many of us, we feel unworthy to be the recipients of God's abundant blessings. We are sinful, we are imperfect, we're not worthy of a piece of square fish from McDonald's, and yet Jesus fills our lives to overflowing with blessings.

That may be why Jesus starts his call to Peter with, "Do not be afraid." What could Peter be afraid of? If Jesus showed up in your life and called you to do something, what would you be afraid of? Afraid of being unqualified for the task? Afraid of not being spiritual enough or smart enough or knowing the Bible well enough? Afraid of failing? We've all gotten a bad grade in our lives, but who wants to get an "F" from Jesus? Jesus calls us each on of us to go deeper, but that's scary. It sure was for Peter.

But Peter says "Yes." What is the greater miracle in this story? The catch of fish, or Peter's decision to leave it lying on the shore? In both cases, the miracle is predicated on Peter's participation, his willingness to let go of what is safe and comfortable. First, he lets go of the shoreline, then he lets go of the catch of fish. In both cases, his trust in Jesus overrides his fear and his sense of security.

Here's what this story tells me: If we want to participate in a miracle, if we want to help show this world what God's kingdom looks like, if we want to be followers of Jesus and not just fans, we can't do it by hugging the shoreline. We are called into the deep water, the place beyond safety and control, the place where we turn our boat over to Jesus and let him guide us.

We each have a next step to take in order to grow in our faith, and I'm pretty sure that step is not back toward shore. You don't get many glimpses of God's kingdom while standing on the dock. So, what is the deep water for you? What is the miracle in which God is inviting you to participate? Is it reminding a shut-in they are not alone? Is it a step up in your giving to make more ministries possible? Is it lending your voice to the church leadership or the choir or a Sunday School class? Where is God calling you into the deep water? And what is keeping you from going there?

Patrick Henry once wrote, "I've never been party to a clear-cut miracle, but I do know the precondition for recognizing one if it happens is the openness to surprise." If we stay where it's safe, we only see and experience what is safe. But if we put out into the deep water, if we dare to go where God calls us, we open ourselves up to the surprising presence of Christ, who fills our souls to overflowing and then calls us to follow him.

And then, we have the indescribable opportunity of becoming the miracle. Every believer is God's miracle. Every person who steps out on faith and gives Jesus command of their boat becomes a living testimony to the power of faith in Jesus Christ. And then, maybe when we least expect it, while we're out there serving, suddenly our boats are overflowing with fish: a child's eyes are opened to a Bible story, a new relationship is made, someone who thought God has forgotten them gets loved on, a person grows in their knowledge and love of Christ because of your relationship with them. When we open ourselves to God's capacity to surprise, miracles happen...through us! The shallow water is safe. But the deep water is where miracles happen.

Sir Francis Drake wrote this: "Disturb us, Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves. When our dreams have come true because we have dreamed too little. When we arrived safely because we sailed too close to shore." Peter took the chance to go into the deeper waters and experienced God's abundance in surprising ways. As we'll see, that doesn't mean he's the perfect follower from this point on. He's going to make some monumental mistakes. You know what? So will we. But isn't the exhilaration of truly following Jesus' call worth the risk? After all, Jesus doesn't say, "Hey, don't mess up or else!" He simply says, "Do not be afraid." There is a whole ocean of opportunity out there to serve Christ, to share his love and grace with others. Sure, the shore is safe. But we're called to something deeper. Are you willing to follow Jesus there? Do not be afraid.