

Signs and Miracles: Vocation and the Miraculous Haul of Fish

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
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Luke 5:1-11

Today our sermon series on signs and miracles continues with a look at today's assigned lectionary passage from Luke's gospel. It is Luke's version of the call of Simon Peter and it features what could be called a miracle and it is certainly a sign. Simon, after fishing all night with no luck, follows Jesus' urging to go out deeper and to cast his nets again, and he pulls in so many fish he can't handle it all. He needs to call in some reinforcements. It's after that event, Luke says, that Jesus calls his first disciple and a few of his fellow fishermen.

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

Today is what we're calling Vocation Sunday, a Sunday we have set aside as a church to reflect on how the God we have come to know in Jesus calls us—calls people to specific occupations, relationships, and tasks. So it's fitting that we'll be hearing from Frank Winston a little bit later in a Real World, Real Faith talk, about his career as a lawyer and how he's responded to God's call within and beyond that occupation. (I was tempted to add, "and in spite of that occupation," but that really is not fair to most lawyers I know!) We will hear from Frank about his vocation—his calling from God—and his occupation—the professional work that has occupied a good portion of his life. We'll get a sense of the degree of overlap between those two.

If we were creating a Venn diagram, I suspect we'd see that vocation, God's calling, has been played out both through the work that we do or have done in the professional realm and the other ways we live out our faith. Vocation, God's call, is about more than just what we do to make money. It's about the relationships and roles that we take on and nurture. It's about the choices we make with how to spend our time and money. It's about what we say yes to and what we say no to.

I may be stating the obvious here, but it's not always easy to discern God's calling on your life and mine. This is true in big ways, to be sure. When it comes to choices about what career paths to pursue, which jobs to apply for and accept (or to leave), or whether to dedicate one's self full-time to the vocation of raising children, it usually takes some prayer and pondering to figure out just where we are being led. I'm the parent of two young adults who are praying and pondering where they are being led.

It can also be true in other settings as well. For instance, whether to say yes to some volunteer opportunity in church or community, how to respond to a particular situation of need of which we become aware, how to make the best use of the limited time and energy any one of us possesses.

Hearing and responding to God's call, not just when it comes to big life decisions but also in the warp and woof of our daily existence, is often a challenge.

Oh, how nice it would be to have the sort of experience Simon Peter has in today's text from Luke whenever we're trying to figure out some next step. While we're not likely to have quite that dramatic an opportunity, it occurs there are some things we can learn from the story of Simon's vocational journey in today's text.

The first is that he welcomed Jesus into the boat with him. That's not a small thing. According to Luke, Simon's boat and another one (we can presume it is James and John's) were pulled up to the shore and they were washing their nets after a long night of fishing. The crowds were pressing in on Jesus, desperately trying to hear God's word. It's almost as if Jesus needed to get away from the jostling, to get a little space. So he hopped into Simon Peter's boat and asked him to put out a ways from the beach, so he could teach from there. Simon didn't tell him no. He didn't say, "Hey, this is my boat. Stay out, we're packing up here. It's the end of the night. We're going home to get a little shut-eye." No, instead he welcomed Jesus onto the boat. Now that's in part because, at least in Luke's version, Jesus has already healed Simon's mother-in-law. So Simon has seen a little something of what Jesus can do. But he could have said no. He really could have.

Instead, he let Jesus onto the boat with him.

You never know what might happen when you let the God we know in Jesus into the boat of your life, but one thing that can happen is that you move from being part of the jostling crowd, pressing, hungry to hear a word from God into having a chance for deeper encounter in a small group or a one-on-one conversation. We don't know how many other people might have been in the boat with Simon, but you can be sure that it was not a large crowd, 30 or 300.

One way to conceive of prayer and meditation and small group studies and discernment teams is that these are moments when we intentionally allow God on-board and into our lives, instead of leaving our relationship with the divine comfortably on the shore somewhere. Being part of the jostling crowd is different than really going deep and getting to know someone. That goes for anyone, God or anyone else. Simon welcomes Jesus, God in flesh, into the boat of his life. He's right up close to listen to Jesus' teaching. Which means he's also right up close to be able to respond when Jesus asks him to put out into the deep water.

Which is the second thing that we can learn from Simon in today's text. Not only do we learn to welcome God into the conversation when it comes to what to do next with our lives (and that seems basic, to welcome God into the conversation, but how often do people, even pastors from time to time, make decisions without that degree of intentionality? Without praying about it? Without stopping to say what do you want? Without inviting God into the boat?). Not only to welcome God into the conversation, but actually to listen to the nudges and urgings and signs that we get. Simon was tired from a long and unsuccessful night out on the lake, and when this carpenter's son who presumably knew less than he did about catching fish, told him to go out again and put down his nets, Simon could have told him, "No. I've tried that. You know it didn't work. And who are you to tell me anything about fishing anyway? Aren't you Joseph's son? Joseph the carpenter? I've never seen you out here on the lake fishing."

Instead, Simon takes on a posture of openness. He's willing to take some direction. And when he does, he receives a sign: a huge haul of fish.

Last Sunday, I mentioned a friend of mine who at one point in his life felt like God didn't love or care about him, and how a friend of his said, "Ask God to give you a sign to serve as proof that God loves you. And don't tell God what that sign has to be, just be on the lookout for it." My friend received his sign the next morning, I still don't know what it was, I'm going to ask him the next time I see

him—but he received it. And a few weeks ago, I told my friend that he was sign, he was proof, of God’s love for me.

I think part of discerning God’s will for us in life, whether it is big career decision or smaller every day choices, is to be open for and looking to receive big and little signs. It doesn’t have to be a miraculous haul of fish. It might be the way things just seem to fall right into place. It might be the person who shows up out of the blue that you haven’t seen in twenty-five years. It might be the bird that you associate with a deceased relative lighting on your windowsill, or a rainbow showing up in a cloudless sky to bring you assurance that what you have done or are thinking about doing is right, or the way someone you never expected takes an interest in your plight.

Somehow, when we are open and willing to try something, it’s been my experience anyway that signs come. The sign Simon received was something he could understand. If you want to get a fisherman’s attention, you send him a monumental run of fish. If you are struggling with a decision, try this. Ask God for a sign and see what happens. What doors open and close, for instance? What shows up? What opportunities are made available?

Speaking of signs, ironically, last night I was thinking about the finishing touches on this sermon. Instead of working on it, I was playing a little word game. Anybody else ever procrastinated? I mean this is the wrong time to procrastinate, Saturday night. Anyway, I’m playing this little word game. I’m actually talking to Judith while I’m playing this word game. The letters are there, M-N-E-R-O-S. I’m looking at the letters and moving them around in my mind and I can’t figure out what they are supposed to spell, rearranged. It is taking me an extraordinarily long time to figure out what those letters put together should spell. Then I told Judith, “I’ve got it! It’s sermon.” I wasn’t asking for that sign, but I got it.

So Simon welcomes Jesus onto the boat, he takes direction, he receives a sign (one that he doesn’t even ask for, but clearly sees as the activity of God), but the next thing that he learns is that he’s going to need help. He can’t do it on his own.

He and his boat are going to sink without some help. Jesus, one imagines, could just walk on water away from the sinking craft, but Simon needs some assistance. So his friends come along beside him and provide some help. That’s another huge piece to consider when it comes to vocation, trying to figure out what God is asking us to do. Both the idea that we need help when it comes to discerning what to do next and the idea that sometimes, maybe even often, what we are asked to do by God can seem bigger than a one-person job. We can’t do it by ourselves. It requires others’ involvement. That’s why we call this a community of faith. In community, we are helped to discern and to carry out what God is calling us to do. This requires teamwork. Aaron Bode in a few minutes will be talking a little bit about community and vocation.

So Simon welcomed Jesus onto the boat, he took direction, he received a sign, he enlisted the help of others. Then something happened. It’s something that happens often when people receive a call from God to do something. He begins to feel unworthy and afraid. Depart from me, he exclaims, for I am a sinful man.

Now this is not an uncommon response to an experience of God’s call in one’s life.

Moses, when he encounters God in the burning bush (and how nice would it be to have burning bushes every once in a while) responds, I can’t do that. I’m not good at talking. And you are asking me to go to Pharaoh?

When God calls Jeremiah, the prophet says, “I can’t do this. I’m too young.”

Gideon is hiding in a wine press when God comes to him. Gideon, who is one of my favorite characters in the Bible, meets an angel in that wine press where he's hiding from the Midianites. The angel says, "Rise up, you mighty man of valor!" as Gideon is cowering there in the wine press.

Isaiah, in the temple in the year when King Uzziah died, is also confronted by an angel, a six-winged seraph, and he responds, "Woe is me. For I am a person of unclean lips and I come from a people of unclean lips." And the seraph flies down and touches a burning coal on his lips.

God comes and touches Isaiah, and touches Gideon and touches Jeremiah and touches Moses and touches Simon and touches you and me and the response is, the only right response to a genuine experience of God's call, is "Here I am, send me."

Regardless of the excuses we can make, regardless of how unworthy or afraid we might be, the right response is here I am send me. Because what Christopher Robin said to Winnie the Pooh is true for you and me, too: "You are braver than you believe, and stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think." ¹

Remember that. I don't care if you're five or 95, you are braver than you believe and stronger than you seem and smarter than you think and if you are still drawing breath God has work for you to do.

So what Jesus told Peter was, "Do not be afraid. From now on, you will be fishing for and catching people." And Simon Peter responded by leaving everything and following where the One who called him led.

It's been Mary Oliver month here at Immanuel. So I want to close with a poem from her hand. It's called "The Journey". ²

*One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice --
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voice behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice*

*which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do --
determined to save
the only life that you could save.*

I would argue that the voice that the poet hears is not just her own voice. It's God's voice speaking within her. And the life that is being saved is not just her own life, but the life of the world.

Because Howard Thurman was right when he advised, "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what **makes you come alive**, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have **come alive**." ³

1 A. A. Milne *Winnie the Pooh* (New York, E.P. Dutton & Company 1926).

2 Mary Oliver. *The Journey* from the book *Dream Work* (New York, Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986).

3 As quoted in Gil Bailie *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996) p. xv.