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**Deep Water (Luke 5: 1-11)**

*Epiphany 5*

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**Reading**

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 signalled 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.

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Reading Scripture is a strange practice. Take the text we just read. I imagine most of you have heard this story many times over – you might have coloured in a drawing of the disciples mending their nets or of Jesus standing in the boat at Sunday school; you've probably sat through several exhortations to 'leave everything behind to follow Jesus', feeling more or less guilty about your comparatively settled existence; and you may recognise it as a familiar element in the annual re-set of the church's preaching program. At the beginning of every year, once the dust has settled on Christmas and the wise men have returned to their homes, we go back to the start of Jesus' ministry – baptism and call, first healings, first proclamation, first disciples. It just happens to be

Luke's version this year. We've heard it all before. So why do we return to the same texts over and over again? What more is there to learn, or to say? Well, a little to my surprise, when I began to prepare for tonight I noticed in this passage some things I'd never really noticed before. And that got me thinking about how reading Scripture works, how it matters.

I'll start with what I noticed. First off, I was struck by the quite significant differences between Luke's version of the calling of the disciples as compared with its rendering by Matthew and Mark. Luke's Jesus has, of course, a significantly longer back story than any other gospel – think of the whole Christmas tableau, the speeches by Mary, Elizabeth and Zechariah, the 12-year old Jesus in the temple in Jerusalem, the lengthy account of his baptism and temptations in the wilderness. And by this point in Luke's narrative, Jesus is already well launched into a solo ministry – in fact, he's had almost a full chapter's worth of action. He's read from the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue and proclaimed the fulfilment of its prophesy; he's narrowly avoided being hurled off a cliff in Nazareth; he's healed the sick in Capernaum and done a bunch more preaching around the region. When he finally gets around (in Chapter 5) to calling some followers, Luke makes it sound almost happenstance: 'Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret', it was convenient to preach from a boat that happened to be there, that happened to belong to Simon, who happened to be in partnership with two brothers James and John, sons of Zebedee. The event of the 'calling' itself seems almost accidental, although on the other hand it is Luke and Luke alone who suggests the significance of relationship in this dynamic. Prior to this day, Luke's Jesus had actually been in Simon's house and healed his mother-in-law, and the decision of the four fishermen to follow him came after the miraculous catch of fish. In other words, they 'knew' him at least to some degree.

By contrast, Mark and Matthew make the calling of the disciples sound simultaneously more intentional and less relational. In both these accounts, although Jesus has begun to proclaim ‘the good news of the kingdom’, no other action has taken place. No healings, no crowd interactions. In these gospels, calling the disciples is the first thing Jesus does, as if he’s intentionally out looking for them, waiting to start his ministry till he has companions, his witnesses in place. And yet there’s no hint in these texts of any prior relationship, either between Jesus and those he calls, nor between the two sets of brothers. In both Matthew and Mark, Jesus sees Simon and his brother Andrew fishing; a little later, he sees James and his brother John. He calls them separately and apparently out of the blue and, out of the blue (as far as we’re told), they choose to follow.

The second thing I noticed when I read tonight’s passage is its resonance with another fishing story. You might remember that right towards the end of John’s gospel, after Jesus’ death, one of his resurrection appearances is to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias in Galilee. This time there’s a few of them present – Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, the sons Zebedee and two others, but – as in our story – it’s been another unsuccessful night in the boats. And once again – it’s Jesus who directs them to where they will find fish. In both cases, the catch is superabundant – though interestingly, while John makes a point of saying that ‘though there were so many, the net was not torn’ (John 21: 11), for Luke, the abundance of the catch results in the ‘nets beginning to break’. But the echo between the stories is clear.

Third, I noticed a parallel between Simon’s response to the miraculous catch and the response of the prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament reading set for today. Luke writes of Simon that ‘he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”, just as Isaiah, had cried out ‘Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King,

the Lord of hosts!' Each has experienced something that overflows their senses and the structures of their lives – Simon's boat is sinking and his nets breaking, the pillars of Isaiah's temple are shaking. Suddenly, they realise that God is upon them and it's terrifying. And finally, I noticed an echo from the psalms. It seems no accident that the disciples are told by Jesus to let their nets into the 'deep water', just as it's no accident that in John's version of this fishing miracle they're told to cast their nets to the right side of the boat. These are stories about being opened to God's abundance and extravagant life, receiving the gift of the Lord who, according to Psalm 110, sits at God's right hand; who is the deep calling to deep of Psalm 42.

So – what to make of all this – these connections, these allusions and resonances. What do they all mean? And what do they suggest about how reading Scripture works, how it matters as a recurring practice? These are huge questions. For what it's worth, let me offer a few thoughts that have occurred to me as I've sat with them for a bit.

I said at the beginning that I'd noticed things in our reading tonight, that I'd never noticed before. And I think there's an important dynamic here between familiarity and strangeness. On the one hand, part of what affects our capacity to 'see', to read deeply, is our willingness to suspend what we think we already know about God and the story of God. We have to let it be strange. For me, the practice of meditation has been critical in developing that capacity. Genuine attention to what is not me – in this case, the biblical text – is fostered by the practice of letting go thoughts, and the growth of an interior spaciousness of mind and heart. In this space, I'm no longer concerned to make the text conform to my pre-existing ideas or interpretation – I'm more able to let it be and so allow it to reveal itself.

Having said this – having stressed the importance of 'beginner's mind' – I think it's also true that part of what affects our capacity to read deeply is our familiarity with the Scripture as a whole, our capacity to pick up the allusions and resonances, the type

scenes and patterns. You don't have to get all the allusions to enjoy and understand it, but just as when a movie or piece of music or poem references another, there's a nuance available, the possibility of a deepened appreciation of what's being communicated when we pick up on this richness, when we see one thing in the light of the other.

Significantly, on this understanding, where there are differences *between* stories, we don't have to see them so much as inconsistencies to be explained (or explained away), as intrinsic to the communication itself, part of how an author highlights something significant. Take the differences I noted between Luke and Matthew and Mark, for example. Whereas Luke the historian seems concerned to make Jesus' calling of Simon and the others believable, narratively plausible, and so situates it in the context of a prior relationship, the abruptness and 'out of the blue-ness' of Matthew and Mark's version communicates a different kind of truth – which is that in the end, no matter what the preamble or lead up, the decision to follow Jesus involves a kind of decisive break with the life you've known till now. Luke emphasises that aspect of the story, by imagining Simon's overwhelmed cry: 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man'. Which refers us back to Isaiah. And forward again, to our own experiences of encounter and call.

Reading Scripture means being drawn into the story of God's presence and action, as undergone over centuries by a whole people. And reading Scripture recurringly teaches us to see our world, our stories in the light of this same presence and action – whose characteristic form involves the breaking open of our existing categories and containing structures with the gift of radical abundance and the challenge of a radical call. We know this story well – or we think we do – yet it seems that the story, like the God of whom it speaks, is never exhausted. And every time we

read it with attention from our hearts, it invites us to cast ourselves again, out into the deep water and to let down our nets for a catch.