

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

'Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat.'

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As is the case with nearly every narrative of the Scriptures, we have just read a rather curious story.

The Lord is surrounded by a great number of people, a tumult, an innumerable throng, pressing upon Him from every side; lost men falling upon the Christ; begging to hear the Word from the Word made Flesh, to listen to God in God made man.

Elsewhere, when sinful men wish to hear Christ speak, Christ finds some high place, sits down, opens His mouth, and speaks His sacred Word. In our Gospel reading today, this is not so.

All beg Him to preach, but in their midst, He said not a word. Rather, *getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And there, he taught the people from the boat.*

A strange thing. Surely it would be easier to speak to the crowds from the dry land than to yell over the lapping of waves and the bustle of fisherman, tearing cord and rope and knot to stabilize a wind tossed ship as it is pulled by the waves. But the sermon our Lord preaches is not so much in the words of His mouth, which Holy Luke does not even bother to record. His sermon is in the ship and the waves; in the fishermen and the cords.

In the ancient world, the sea was viewed as the territory of chaos and death; where no man had a place; where writhing beasts which surfaced only to devour, and then disappeared into the wine-black water had their home. Where Leviathan ruled in fear; where the treasures of men were consumed in storm and lost

forever with no hope of rescue. A domain that no man had any right; that only God could tame by dividing it as He had in time past in the Red Sea and the River Jordan.

This, then, is the sermon of our Lord. Hear him, and be still.

The kingdom of heaven can be likened unto a fisher's vessel that has been set out into the sea. Within this ship there dwells a master of the house, and around this master, there dwell fishermen. The master asks his servants 'Go out into the depth of the sea, where there is greatest danger, that there you may fish while it is night.' And going out into the darkness of the sea in the shadow of night, the servants cast their nets, but no fish were to be found. And their faces were downcast. And when the sun arose in the east of the morning, the servants complained to the master saying 'We did as you said in the shadow of night, and found no fish. And now the daylight is coming, when no fish can be caught.' And the master replied, 'Cast again your nets into the water, in the light of dawn, in the warmth of the morning.' And the servants did as they had been commanded, and behold, there was a great catch of fish; so great that the servants had to summon another boat of fisherman from afar off to help them divide the fish, lest their nets break or their ship sink from the weight. Therefore in the kingdom of heaven while it is night shall no man enter the master's ark. But in the light of day shall all be drawn in.

'And the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Why do you speak to them in parables?"'

'And the Lord replied, "Blessed are your ears, that they hear, and your eyes, that they see." Hear, then, the meaning of the parable of the great catch of fish.

The Son of Man shall enter into His Church, which is the fisherman's ship, and it shall sail into the deeps of the sea, in the darkness of night, and there, He and his servant shall draw no man unto Himself, *'for the Son of Man must suffer many things at the hands of sinners, and must be killed.'* For in the Garden of Gethsemane He shall be betrayed, and all His own will forsake him, *for it was night.* And in the night of His abandonment, the Son shall be crucified, die, and be buried. But when the morning comes, and the Son of Man shall *in the dawn of the first day rise again,* His servants shall again hear His voice, and in obedience to Him, *preach the Gospel to all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father*

and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. For this is the meaning of the master's servants casting their nets anew in the dawn into the depths of the sea. And countless of the unbelieving world, drawn from the chaos and madness of heathen life, shall come into the ark of the Church, which is the meaning of the great catch of fish; so many that a second boat shall be called to share in the catch, which is the Church of the gentiles; for the *Gospel is to both Jew and Gentile*, and so great will be their number, that if it were not for the Church of the Gentiles, the very ark of God which bore all the living creatures of the earth during the great flood would itself be broken and shipwrecked.

'But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man.'

For Peter, as all the Apostles, and every priest and teacher that would follow him for two thousand years to this day fears being sent into the darkness of our secular world; fears bearing in the nets of Christ's Gospel and catching the masses of the unbaptized, for they do so as unholy men, before a holy God, *a consuming fire*. Simon Peter cries out *'I am a sinful man.'* It is an echo of another: *'I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips.'*

Yet from the throne of God flies a seraphim, *a burning coal taken with tongs from the altar of the Lord of hosts* *'Behold, this has touched your lips, your guilt is taken away.'*

And Simon Peter and the Apostles, and age upon age of the called and ordained *left everything and followed him.*

But today's readings are not for us few who wear clericals and have received holy orders and taken vows. Behold, an altar lies before us, laden for you, *O ye gods, and ye sons of the most high* by those who have *left everything*. A liturgy rings out from heaven, angels and dominions, thrones and powers, singing *'Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Sabaoth'*, and we, who count this angelic throng, this invincible army, our friends and brethren, join in their song. And as we enter the temple of this chancel, and bow in reverence to the altar of the Everlasting God, behold a seraph comes with a burning coal, bread aflame with the body and Spirit of Christ, even as the fire of God once filled the bush of Sinai.

'Woe are you, for you are lost, for you are a sinner, and you dwell in the the midst of a people of unclean lips.'

But *'do not be afraid.'* *'Take and eat'*, it is the Lord's command. And as you receive Christ's body into your mouth, hear His voice, and dare not doubt:

'Behold, this has touched your lips, your guilt is taken away, your sin atoned for.'

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Preached by Rev. Fields

Sermon text: Luke 5:1-11, Isaiah 6:1-8