

**GO FISHING**  
**a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Easter, 2018**  
**based on Luke 5:1-11 John 21:4-17**

The sermon this morning is the conclusion of a sermon series entitled, "Journey to Jerusalem." Since the beginning of January, we have been journeying with Jesus through the course of his public ministry, and we arrive now at one of the last resurrection appearances of Jesus.

One of the interesting features of the journey of Jesus is that his course in public ministry is bracketed by fishing stories. At the beginning, there is the story of Jesus calling four fishermen to be disciples; and as a part of that there is the story of Simon Peter, who at the prompting of Jesus made a huge catch of fish. Then at the end of the gospels, after the Resurrection and the account of the women at the empty tomb, there is a story of Peter making another amazing catch of fish. These fishing stories have something extremely valuable to say to you and me, even if you don't like fishing. Let us begin with a moment of prayer ...

I once caught a four foot long trout. April fool! Or you might say, that is just a typical fish story. The fish seem to morph and grow when stories are told about the catch. I actually caught a four inch bluegill. So are the gospel stories just typical fish stories? Many people today would cast doubt on the veracity of Biblical stories about Jesus and his miracles, and his Resurrection.

It is interesting that today is both Easter and April Fools' Day, because there is a long history of people saying that the whole message of Jesus is just plain foolishness. The apostle Paul wrote about this in the first century when he said that the message of the cross is foolishness to many in the world. [*We preach Christ crucified . . . foolishness to the Gentiles I Cor. 1:23*] Isn't it just foolish to believe these amazing accounts of miracles, and someone rising from the dead, and isn't it foolish to do what these stories call for—to devote one's life in service for Jesus and for humanity?

I suppose it is especially difficult for people today to discern what is simply an old fish story and what is really true because we have hard time figuring out what is true just when looking at the daily news. We constantly hear people making all kinds of conflicting and exaggerated claims, and it seems that people often choose what to think because it is what they want to think, regardless of whether there is any basis in reality.

But the gospel accounts are quite different from the sort of bias and distortion that you find in today's political speech or in cable news shows. Today people spin every story to make their side look good. But in the gospels, written by Christians, the early Christian leaders look terrible. Peter was one of the top leaders of the early church, but in the gospel accounts about him, he appears as a complete dud. If he were a political candidate today, his team would have covered over or reconfigured all those negative stories, and come up with

some better marketing. After all, the gospels are supposed to draw people into Christian faith, to become a part of the church. But who will want to join a movement whose leaders are deeply flawed? Yet Peter, one of the most prominent of church figures, appears in the gospels in all his weakness and failings. The Bible just speaks with brutal honesty.

This actually is the nature of the Bible from beginning to end. When the Old Testament tells the story of ancient Israel, you would think that the Biblical writers would have sought to glorify their nation's past and idealize its prime leaders. Yet when the Bible talks about Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Rebekah, and about Moses and David, they all appear as seriously flawed, and they all engage in actions that are both dumb and wrong. The prime Old Testament figures are not heroes at all. And the story of people of Israel as a whole is most unflattering; they appear as repeatedly bungling and falling short of God's call. The Bible does not put a nice spin on anything, or try to polish things up. It just tells it like it is.

But this is why we can connect with the Bible—because we live in the midst of the rough realities of life and considerable imperfection, especially when we look at our own selves. We are flawed, we have done things that are dumb and wrong, and we have fallen short even of our own ideals. So when we look at ordinary, imperfect Peter and see that he has a place in the Biblical story, we recognize that this is a story for us. It is a story about real human beings and the real answers that they find to the challenges of life.

The story of Peter begins at a lakeshore. We touched on this story at the start of this sermon series. Peter, who at this point was still called Simon, had been out all night fishing with no results. I've been out all day fishing with no results; but Simon Peter was a professional and depending on fishing for a living, so his experience was really discouraging. Tired and dejected, he pulled his boat up to shore at a spot where Jesus was speaking to a crowd. He and his brother Andrew were at one boat, and their partners James and John were at another boat, washing their nets while listening to Jesus. *[The fishermen were washing their nets. Luke 5:2]* The crowd kept getting larger and pressing in; so Jesus got into Simon Peter's boat, turning it into a floating pulpit. *[Jesus got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon Luke 5:3]* After the sermon, Jesus told Peter to put out into deeper water and cast down his nets again. *[Jesus said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch. Luke 5:4]*

Have you ever been totally frustrated with something, and you are just worn out, and someone suggests you should give it another try? You might not be terribly receptive to that suggestion. Simon Peter said to Jesus, "We fished all night here and caught nothing." *[Luke 5:5a]* But somehow he sensed that Jesus could open up new possibilities. So he continued, "But if you say so, I will let down the nets again." *[Luke 5:5b]*

He reluctantly did so, and suddenly the net was so full he could not pull it in, and the netting was starting to break. *[They caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. Luke 5:6]* He and Andrew summoned their partners for help. *[They signaled their partners in the*

*other boat to come and help them. Luke 5:7a]* Using both boats they struggled to pull in the net and dumped so many fish into the boats that they were on the verge of sinking. *[They filled both boats, so that they began to sink . . . Luke 5:7b]* This is not a story you would tell to show off your fishing skills! In that moment, Simon Peter became keenly aware of two things—Jesus was filled with the power of God; and he, Simon Peter, was not worthy. He said to Jesus, “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinner.” [Luke 5:8]

This past week, during spring break, my wife and I did what many parents do who have a junior in high school—we went with our eleventh grade son Joshua on college visits. Our ninth grade son Nathan had to do what younger siblings often do in this circumstance—tolerate one visit after another. More than once during those visits, an admissions counselor told Joshua that when writing his college essay, he needed to brag about himself. Humility was a good thing, they allowed, but now he needed to tell the good and admirable things about himself. Simon Peter did not do this at all. First, he let Jesus know what a lousy fisherman he was. Then he said flat out that he was deeply flawed and unworthy. If he were applying for college, he would not get far.

But with Jesus, he was accepted. Simon Peter thus becomes a prime example that you can be a sinner— you may have made huge mistakes, you may be light years away from being perfect, you may feel inadequate and unworthy—but Jesus invites you to be a disciple. Jesus meets our imperfection with infinite grace. The key thing for us is to be honest with ourselves, to acknowledge our need, and to open ourselves to Christ.

From that point on, Simon Peter followed Jesus and grew as a disciple; but he still had many points of imperfection, as we have seen during this sermon series. At one key juncture, Simon Peter was the first disciple to clearly profess that Jesus is the Messiah. Very good! Then, he completely misunderstood what kind of Messiah Jesus is, that Jesus would have to suffer, and Jesus said to him, “Get behind me, Satan!” Not so good. On another occasion, when Jesus was walking on water, Simon Peter got out of the boat and in the power of faith in Christ began walking on water himself. Very good! Then he started to sink. Not so good. Later on, Simon Peter was one of three disciples chosen to accompany Jesus to the top of a mountain, where he witnessed the Transfiguration, beholding Jesus in his divine glory. Very good! Then on the mountaintop, Simon Peter said something really silly that revealed he did not understand what was going on at all. Not so good.

Of all the disciples, Simon Peter was the one with the most ups and downs. This perhaps is why we readily identify with him, because in our spiritual journey, we have our good moments, and then we have times when we may feel we have not progressed at all. For Simon Peter, this pattern came to a climax during Holy Week. At the Last Supper, Peter courageously declared that even if everyone else fell away, he would never abandon Jesus. But Jesus answered that in fact Peter would deny him three times. And that, of course, is precisely what Peter did, when after Jesus’ arrest, Peter said three times that he did not even know Jesus. Not so good.

At any university, there comes a time when after so many fails you just flunk out. This is what Peter felt that he had done after the denial. He felt he had thoroughly washed out as a disciple. This is why, after Easter, even after he had witnessed the extraordinary reality of the empty tomb, Peter subsequently went fishing on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus might be alive, he thought, but he, Simon Peter, had failed at discipleship. There was nothing left for him to do but return to his old line of work.

But as Peter was fishing, and catching nothing, he heard a voice from the shore, saying, "Cast the net in to the right side of the boat." [John 21:6a] As Peter did so, the net was so full of fish they could scarcely haul it in. [*So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. [John 21:6b]*] It was the voice of Jesus, who had not given up on Peter, even though he had given up on himself. Peter sprang into the water, leaving his partners in the boat (who were not far from land), and swam to shore. [*Peter jumped into the sea. John 21:7*] There the Risen Jesus said to Simon Peter three times, "Do you love me?" It was a threefold opportunity to reverse the three times that Peter had denied Jesus; and as Peter answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you," Jesus said to him each time, "Feed my sheep." [*Jesus said, "Simon, do you love me? He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep." [John 21:15-17]*] Jesus was calling Peter to lead the church. It was an extraordinary declaration that Jesus never gives up on us; he calls each one of us, in spite of our failings and our weaknesses, to find our destiny in Christ.

In this regard, Jesus gave Peter two very memorable images of his calling. One was the image of the shepherd and sheep, and the other was the image of the great catch of fish—an especially pertinent image for Peter, telling him how Christ would vastly empower his efforts. When Jesus had originally called Simon Peter and the other fishermen, he had said to them, "Follow me, and I will enable you to fish for people." [Mark 1:17] This image, however, may be a bit awkward for us, because when we think of fishing, we typically think of hook and line fishing. In that method, you lure a fish with bait, trick it into taking a bite, then you snag it through the mouth with a hook and drag it up out of the water, where it gasps for breath until you chop off its head and fry it up for dinner. As an image for ministry with people, this does not seem especially good. But to appreciate the Biblical image, we need to shift the picture we have in mind to the type of fishing that Peter was doing, which was fishing with nets. Here the image is of drawing fish to the boat. Significantly Jesus had once said, "I will draw all people unto myself" [John 12:32]; and the original Greek word used here for "draw" is exactly the same word that is used in the gospel to describe fishermen drawing in fish. The picture given to Peter is that he is to be involved now in drawing many people to Christ.

That picture receives further elaboration when it is said that the total number of fish in the net was 153. [*Simon Peter hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a 153 of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. John 21:11*] The ancient scholar Jerome tells us that in the first century people believed that there were 153 different species of fish in the Sea of Galilee. So the fact that there were 153 fish in the net was a symbol of how Christ

would draw every sort of person, people of every nation and race, people of all kinds to his Kingdom. The fact that the net was not torn is an additional very important symbol. It says that when we welcome all, we need not fear breaking apart, because God's grace embraces all. That is, we need not fear as long as we are relying on the strength of God. Recall that in the first story of the great catch, the nets were starting to break. [*They caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. Luke 5:6*] Now they do not break—a picture of how Christ will empower us to live as disciples and be in ministry to all in the world.

After this encounter with the Risen Christ, Peter went forth to become a key leader in the early church. Easter for him was thus finally not only the day when Jesus brought the promise of life beyond death. It was the time when Jesus raised him to new life now. Peter was raised from discouragement and unworthiness to a life of sharing in the grace and the purposes of God, and being able to touch a great many people with the compassion of Christ.

Certainly for much of Peter's journey, it must have appeared that he was involved in sheer foolishness. Wasn't it foolish for Peter to cast the nets again when there were plainly no fish around, and wasn't it foolish to even think about being a disciple of Jesus? It may seem foolish today to believe that God can open new possibilities, or that God will accept us, or that God has for us an eternal destiny. But on Easter, what seems foolish becomes real. God raises to new life; and so we are invited, like Peter, to hear Jesus calling to us, to put our trust in Him, and finally to go fishing: to go forth in God's strength and reach to the world with the good news and love of Jesus Christ.