

Disciples of the Deep

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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February 10, 2019

Psalm 104:1-13

¹Bless the LORD, O my soul. O LORD my God, you are very great. You are clothed with honor and majesty, ²wrapped in light as with a garment. You stretch out the heavens like a tent, ³you set the beams of your chambers on the waters, you make the clouds your chariot, you ride on the wings of the wind, ⁴you make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers. ⁵You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken. ⁶You cover it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains. ⁷At your rebuke they flee; at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.

⁸They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys to the place that you appointed for them. ⁹You set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth. ¹⁰You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, ¹¹giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst. ¹²By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches. ¹³From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

Luke 5:1-11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, ²he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³He 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. ⁴When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” ⁵Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” ⁶When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. ⁷So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” ⁹For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; ¹⁰and 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.” ¹¹When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

As we all know the earliest disciples of Jesus were fishermen, and the gospels tell us Jesus' initial call to follow him was accompanied by these words: "From now on you will be catching people." Sheer familiarity with that expression, has led most of us, I imagine, to accept the analogy as a vocational shift for these fishermen who left one way of life represented by their nets, boat and Father Zebedee, for another way of life as followers and friends of Jesus. But if you stop and think about it, you have to wonder what exactly does it mean to fish for people? After all, when fish get caught, it is not a very good thing for the fish! Their silvery, shining, flip-flopping bodies soon have the life drained out of them and they become dull, gray and dead. Not such a pretty image, for people to be likened to caught fish! But the gospel story before us this morning points to a more life-giving image for the people caught up in the net of the Kingdom of God, because it hinges on something Jesus tells the fisherman to do: "Put out into deep water," "and let your nets down there for a catch."

Now, to fish in deep water would have been counter-intuitive for these professional fishermen on the lake of Gennesaret, Luke's name for the Sea of Galilee. While the absolutely exhausted Simon Peter stands on the shore saying, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing," you can also imagine he's thinking – what on earth does Jesus, the son of a carpenter, know about fishing? Going out in deep water was not a logical place to cast a net for Simon Peter, or for James and John, skilled fisherman all. They knew the best fishing was near the shore, half way between the villages of Capernaum and Gennesaret, in the shallow coves where the warm mineral springs flow into the lake and make them fertile for fishermen.

Jesus was an exciting teacher about God, but you can tell he doesn't know much about fishing when he says, move away from the shore where you no longer know the lay of the land, and drop your nets in deep water. That would make no sense to a fisherman, but it makes perfect sense for the spread of the gospel. What the gospel writer Luke wants us to know is that while the fishermen are still looking for fish, Jesus is already talking about catching people. In order to catch people – you cannot stay in the shallows. You have to go deep.

A couple of months ago, *The Washington Post* published an article with this haunting title: “An entire generation is losing hope.” From government gridlock and the opioid epidemic in our country, to extreme poverty and famine abroad, to the environmental crisis of climate change everywhere, younger Americans are losing hope that the future holds forth a brighter tomorrow. So guess where a growing number are turning for comfort?? Witchcraft. That’s right. Witchcraft is the fast growing form of spiritual solace for many young adults. The incantations and rituals are attracting practitioners by making them feel they have some control in a world seemingly out of control. The article says: “The growing interest in witches and witchcraft speaks to a uniquely unsettled moment in U.S. history – and an unprecedented loss of hope felt by an entire generation. Absent anything else to hold on to, they are reaching into the dark... there is a sense that today’s problems are so entrenched that it will take something otherworldly to fix them. Enter the witch.”¹

It’s hard to know what is more troubling – younger Americans finding witchcraft as something to hold on to? Or the premise that a whole generation is losing hope. If there is any truth in that observation, then I think what it invites the church to pay attention to, is that we won’t be of any use casting our nets in the shallows. We have to go deep, as the text says, to push out into the deep, where Jesus takes us and go fishing for people there. To reach out to people who are looking for the kind of hope our Christian tradition offers, the kind of hope that holds fast to faith with one hand, and grabs on to love with the other, and won’t give up on this weary world of ours because we believe that God is in the midst of it, the muck and the mess of it, slowly bending an arc toward justice, and engaging us in acts of redemption.

When Jesus says to the fishermen, “put out into the deep water,” it is not so much about fishing, as a continuation of his teaching about where we find abundant life with God. That’s what the big haul of fish represents in this

¹ *The Washington Post*, Nov. 18, 2018. A similar article ran in *The New York Times* in August, 2018, indicating there were over 800 known covens of Wicca practicing in New York City.

story, the abundant life God offers, drawn up from the depths of mystery and uncertainty and grace.

Throughout the Bible, you see, the deep is a highly symbolic word for that terrifying place where people most need a connection with the living God. The very first verses of scripture, in the book of Genesis, say that when God created the heavens and the earth, “the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep.”² There, “the deep” means that mysterious, unordered place where people are yearning for God to bring order out of chaos.

In another passage of scripture, the Psalmist cries out to God saying, “In the abundance of your steadfast love, answer me. Let me be delivered from my enemies and from the deep waters.”³ That is the deep of extreme yearning in a time of crisis, the prayer of desperation for God to come to one’s assistance, to rescue and to save.

In another, very familiar part of scripture, where we have a story that is absolutely central to our Christian life, we find that word deep again. In the gospel accounts of the resurrection, we are told the women arrive at the tomb of Jesus “at early dawn.”⁴ The Greek word there for “early” is really a word better translated as “deep.” The women arrive at deep dawn – it’s that fearful time – when there is more darkness than light, when their friend, mentor and Lord had died on Friday, and they are still in shock about it, and yet they are doing what people have to do – getting ready for a funeral. There, “deep dawn” is that time of unbearable grief before the light of resurrection begins to warm the human spirit with hope and peace.

So back to our story for today, when Jesus told those fishermen, “Put out into the deep water,” he was using a powerful, biblical metaphor for all that we cannot see about God, but in which we none-the-less place our trust, and find glimpses of the source of all goodness – that gives us courage to face

² Genesis 1:2.

³ Psalm 69:14.

⁴ Luke 24:1.

these days that are often fraught with fear and foreboding. We are being called to do the evangelistic work of the gospel – to catch people. And we have to go where the questions of faith are profound, where doubts about who God is and who we are in relationship to God tug at the heart and where love and hope conquer our fears, and give us courage to be followers of Jesus Christ.

In the face of human despair – shallow, surface, easy-answer religion may work for a while, but it is not what sustains people for the long run. What sustains people for the long run is faith that makes room for doubt, for a wide breadth of conversation partners, for moral imagination, for ethical wrestling, and hands on engagement with the needs of the world.

I have been reading Krista Tippett’s most recent bestseller, *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry in the Mystery and Art of Living*. As the award-winning host of the radio and podcast program, *On Being*, she describes herself as a person who listens for a living. She has had an extraordinary range of conversation partners – notable scientists, religious and civic leaders, authors, artists, business people, psychiatrists and social scientists, medical professionals, you name it. This book is an amazing repository of wisdom for living gleaned – for our time as she describes it, when “The discourse of our common life inches toward despair.” She writes, “If God is God – and that itself is a crazy shorthand, begging volumes of unfolding of the question – God does not need us craven. God desires us, needs us, grateful and attentive and courageous in the everyday... If God is the ‘Mind behind the universe,’ God honors our minds. If God is the ‘ground of being,’ God blesses our wholeness.”

Then Tippett goes on to discuss her growing faith: “The fear of the religion of my childhood was about measuring up – about moral perfection, and the eternal cost of falling short. For me now, faith is in interplay with moral imagination, something distinct from moral perfection. I am still figuring out what that means, how to nurture it in myself and in others... in our common life... Faith is evolutionary, in every culture, and in any life. Even a person who could proclaim, all of their days, ‘I believe in God’ or ‘I trust in prayer’ would fill those words with endlessly transforming memories, experiences, connotations.) ... So then... “Wisdom, of the everyday sort, is

about how we reckon with the surprises and mysteries that make life *life* as opposed to stasis.”⁵

To make life a genuine, authentic, evolving life is the kind of deep water to which Jesus is calling us. This scripture is calling a church like Bryn Mawr Presbyterian to go with Jesus, to let our nets down below any surface religiosity. To risk leaving the comfortable shallows of life, and to explore the depths of faith *and* faithfulness.

Some of that can happen in worship, I think, but more often it happens in conversation with one another – heading out together on a mission initiative, around a Bible Study, discussing a book about Bonhoeffer together, talking about the importance of race and racism in our community, attending a church school class, teaching little children and youth who are bold to ask deep questions of faith without embarrassment. To figure out what we are willing to give up and leave behind in order to go after a life with Christ. To share with others what that life means from our inner selves, and to give of ourselves for the common good.

We, who are gathered here, are being caught up in the net of God’s abundant life. In response, Jesus calls us to reach into deep water and share that life with everyone we meet.

AMEN.

⁵ Krista Tippet, p. 4 and 162.