

*Texts: Jer. 16:14-16, 21; Luke 5:1-11*

*Subject: Fishing for People*

*Theme: Great Expectations*

*Third Sunday after Epiphany; Jan. 24, 2021; Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

In school, I was always the smallest kid in my class. Early in my first year of ninth grade, I was coming out of the cafeteria when I was stopped by the high school wrestling coach. He invited me to practice. I had never wrestled, or known anything about the sport, other than watching Hulk Hogan and Andre the Giant on television. He insisted that I was going to wrestle for the team. This man saw me, and made a personal invitation to participate in something I had no idea about. To have a legal match, a student had to weight at least 88 pounds. At age 14, I weighed in 10 pounds under. Something about his insistence excited me enough to show up and find out what it was all about. I kept on coming. I learned a lot over the next 4 years, about hard work, dedication, leadership, commitment, teamwork, perseverance, and more, but it all started because someone saw something in me, and called me out of my comfort zone. As a skinny kid, I could not have expected I would be wrestling with future college football players, growing as a team captain, going to the state tournament my senior year, or building the memories and friendships that remain with me today.

But God moves us beyond our expectations.

Luke's account of the good news has Jesus on the move. He's been preaching and teaching in the synagogues, and though he was not accepted in his hometown of Nazareth, he kept on going, to Capernaum where he cast out a demon and healed people with diseases, and into the deserted places. He met Simon and healed his

mother in law. The people wanted to keep him around, and they longed to hear from him. So much, that while he was near the sea of Galilee, they crowded around him, and he had to get into an empty boat to be able to speak to the crowds.

There on the shore, the exhausted and disappointed fishermen were mending their nets after working all night. They hadn't caught anything. They could only see their failure. Jesus sees them and says to get back out there. He sends them into a deeper part of the lake to find the fish. It seems strange. With the sun up, their linen nets would be more easily seen by the fish, that's why they worked at night. Simon responds to the Master's request, not expecting it to work out, but because of Jesus' command, he gets back to work. Out there in the water, they caught so many fish, the boats began to sink. It was more than food for the day. This amount of fish would provide a great income for their families. There would be food for many, and the great windfall would sustain their business.

Peter recognizes the miracle - this sign from God. He knows he's not worthy to be in Jesus presence, and identifies himself as a sinner (readers familiar to this story know that later, he'll be the one to identify Jesus as Messiah). he begs Jesus to go away from him. But Jesus had another plan. He calms their fears and invites Peter, along with James and John, to leave their nets and their boats behind, and to come and follow Him.

To follow Jesus is not an easy thing, and we are frustrated at times. Fishing for people is kind of a strange image to begin with. We can imagine them being 'hooked' against their will. Maybe we hear this invitation of Jesus as a call to drag people into the church. And so often, we invite people and they don't come. They come once and not

again, or they say they will and don't follow through. We might get discouraged and think that we have the wrong message, the wrong style, the wrong music, or the wrong preacher. We work and work and don't see the results. In the world, we expect that things will always progress in a certain way. We'll get what we deserve. Our work will always be rewarded. The past is always an indication of the future.

As people of faith, we ought to be expecting something else. Life from death. Mercy instead of vengeance. Justice and peace. Our expectations are grounded in the Word, and the power of God to do even more than we can ever ask for or expect. The story of God, is of creation and liberation from oppression and death, victory in the harshest of circumstances, abundance for a world in fear of scarcity, unimaginable grace and undeserved, unconditional love for each one of us. The same Word that called the tired fishermen out to sea and out into the world to follow him calls us. This Word changed them from anglers into apostles and invites us to be transformed too - to be His disciples, to learn from Him, to welcome this word into us, and to live with it and share it.

Our nets are our expectations. They're about to break. Maybe we're too focused on mending our own nets to see the big catch - the abundance of grace and joy and love God has for us. We're called to leave those nets behind. Jesus is leading us into deeper waters, calling us to live in a new way.

We've heard it said, "the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." When we've tried to reach a goal, and our expectations are not met, we can easily decide that it was not a worthy goal to begin

with, that we do not have the tools to make it, or that the task was impossible to begin with. We get discouraged. We give up.

This week, rostered ministers in our church were supposed to be on a live zoom conference with our Presiding Bishop , Elizabeth Eaton, and leaders from our churchwide office, to discuss the future of our ministry in the ELCA - new structures and next steps to share the good news. But something happened - technical difficulties. Some internet outage prevented the whole meeting from happening, and pastors and deacons from across the country were left wondering what happened, and they were complaining about things and bellyaching about ineffectiveness and poor communication. A few hours later we were finally able to view a recorded presentation, and while mostly vague and underwhelming, I heard something that resonated with me. Mikka McCracken, executive for innovation, director of the ELCA Leadership Lab noted that as followers of Jesus we get to “trust so deeply in the transforming power of God that we do not resist change but insist on it.”

What did these first disciples expect when the sun rose that morning? Would they go home and sleep on empty stomachs, to try again the next night? What they witnessed was the power of God in Jesus. This sign of a boatload of fish caught their attention, and his message of the coming kingdom of God would be their focus until the rest of their days.

What do you expect God to do in your life? What can we expect for our future together? What will transform us from old ways of thinking? Will the signs of God’s abundance in this time of scarcity wake us up to the needs of our neighbors? Will the power of God’s healing excite us to share our faith and give us words to witness to

the love that unites and sustains us? Will the sign of an empty cross, an empty tomb, and an abundance of answered prayers transform our hearts from fear and self-interest to love God and one another for the rest of our days?

Rather than saying we have a mission, Raphael Malpica Padilla, our ELCA Executive Director for Global Mission, is fond of stating that “God’s mission has a church.” This mission is God’s mission: the redemption, reconciling and renewing of the universe through the living word of Christ. We get to participate in the world God created and loves too. This powerful Word comes to us, is activated by the Spirit of faith, and dwells in us, driving us beyond the boundaries and borders we create, and sends us to serve one another, in the name of Jesus. Who are we in the story? We are those weary workers who have fished for so long, and have been discouraged. We are those first hearers on the beach, listening for the good news of the kingdom that comes to us. We are Peter, who fails to understand where he’s going and exactly what will happen next. We are the faithful ones who follow Jesus in to the unknown to care and share and serve and give and live this new kind of life every day. Because he knows us and knows what we are capable of. Because He teaches us and we are always learning. Because He claims us, and because He calls us to follow Him.

Amen.