

**On the Road with Jesus
AT THE BEACH**

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A few years ago I drove to Surf City to celebrate communion with Rev. Edward Franklin Johnston and some of his family and friends, shortly before Ed died. The mayor of Surf City, Zander Guy, was there. As we were talking, Mayor Guy asked me, "How many people do you have in worship at the Wallace Presbyterian Church?" "Well," I said, "from November through April, probably about 120 or so. From May through October, probably 120." "Really?" the mayor asked, somewhat surprised. "Yes," I said, "from May through October, "70 or 80 in Wallace and 40 or 50 down here at the beach. At least, I hope they're in worship when they're here at the beach." The mayor laughed and said, "Keep sending them here!"

"On the road again, Just can't wait to get on the road again, Goin' places that I've never been, Seein' things that I may never see again."

Today we're at the beach, but it's not Surf City or North Topsail or Wrightsville Beach. We're by Lake Gennesaret, better known as the Sea of Galilee. Nancy and I had a friend in Richmond named Sophie Ann. She was my boss for three years in the seminary library. Sophie Ann visited our church in Roanoke Rapids and showed pictures and told about a trip she took to the Holy Land. Although she was a faithful Christian, by her own admission, Sophie Ann said she wasn't particularly interested in visiting the Holy Land for faith purposes. However, she told us that night how overwhelmed she was when she went swimming in the Sea of Galilee. She thought, "I'm swimming where Jesus walked on water, calmed the storm, and called the disciples."

The Sea of Galilee, located north in Galilee, is about 700 feet below sea level and 150 feet deep. Snow melt from Mt. Hermon north of the lake is carried by the Jordan River through the 13-mile long lake and empties out to run down to the Dead Sea. You may remember the story from the gospels about the disciples and Jesus in the boat when a sudden storm threatens to sink the boat. Such storms are common on the lake because of the sudden temperature shifts caused by the contrast between the below sea level waters of the lake and the surrounding 1,200 - 1,500 feet high mountains.

In today's story, Luke tells us that Jesus was standing by Lake Gennesaret and saw two boats moored by the lake. Two fishermen had gotten out of the boats and were washing their nets. Then as now, fishing was an important industry. The Sea of Galilee has forty different species of fish. In Jesus' day, the western coast of the lake became one of the larger population centers of Palestine because of the fishing industry. Salted fish were exported throughout the Roman Empire.¹ Here are some towns located near

or on the lake that you may recognize from the Gospels: Bethsaida, Capernaum, Chorazin, Gadara, Gennesaret, Magdala, and Tiberias. Luke doesn't tell us exactly where by Lake Gennesaret Jesus was standing, but let's assume it was somewhere near Capernaum, on the upper northern shore, since Jesus used Capernaum as the center of his Galilean ministry and, at the end of Luke 4, Jesus has just wrapped up a preaching, teaching, and healing tour.

Already this early in the gospel, Jesus' reputation has preceded him to the beach. Luke tells us "the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God." (Luke 5:2) There were so many people jostling him that Jesus asked Simon to take him out in his boat a little ways offshore so he could teach the crowd. Just a few short verses earlier in Luke's gospel story, "Jesus went down to Capernaum, and was teaching them on the sabbath. They were astounded at his teaching, because he spoke with authority. They were all amazed and kept saying to one another, 'What kind of utterance is this? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and out they come!' And a report about him began to reach every place in the region." (Luke 4:31-32, 36-37)

So, the word was out about Jesus — and there, at the beach, Jesus was getting the word out about God. There is another "word" at work here in this story. The spotlight moves from Jesus to Simon the fisherman, in whose boat Jesus had been sitting and teaching. "When he had finished teaching, he said to Simon, 'Push out into the deep water and let your nets out for a catch.' Simon said, 'Master, we've been fishing all night and haven't caught even a minnow. But if you say so, I'll let out the nets.' It was no sooner said than done — a huge haul of fish, straining the nets past capacity. They waved to their partners in the other boat to come help them. They filled both boats, nearly swamping them with the catch."²

Simon was a professional fisherman. He knew how to fish the Sea of Galilee. He knew where the best spots were for catching fish. He knew there would be nights when he and his fishin' buddies would catch nothing. Simon knew what he was talking about when it came to fishing. He knew what it was like to be tired and sleepy and sweaty and hungry and achy after throwing out the nets over and over again all night long, with nothing to show for his labors and no fish to sell in the market at Capernaum. Simon **knew** fishing.

Imagine, then, the encounter between Jesus and Simon there on the beach that morning. The last thing Simon probably wanted to do after a long night of unsuccessful fishing was to put his boat back in the water. But that's what Simon did. Maybe Simon listened to Jesus teaching. Maybe Simon worked on his nets some more. Maybe Simon grabbed 40 winks in the bow of the boat.

No matter what Simon did while Jesus taught from his boat, when Jesus finished teaching, Simon was in for another surprising word from the Lord. Jesus said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." What do you think Simon was thinking? "Why don't you stick to preaching and teaching and leave the fishing to me? You don't know what you're asking." Simon either plainly states the facts or he gives Jesus a little push back when he says, "Master, we have worked all

night long but have caught nothing.” But — yet — still — that little word makes a big difference in this story — “**Although** we have worked hard through the whole night and caught nothing, **still/yet** on the basis of your word/**but** if you say so, I will let down the nets.” Then Simon and his partners “were goin’ places they’d never been, Seein’ things they may never see again!”

Like the crowds who had heard Jesus teaching in Capernaum and then crowded him at the beach by the lake, Simon Peter got a glimpse of the power and knowledge of Jesus’ word. Jesus — the Word of God in the flesh — brought the word to bear on Simon’s life there at the beach. As someone put it, Jesus said it. Peter does it.

There’s another word at work in this story, although Luke isn’t quite as specific as his counterparts, Matthew and Mark, are in their telling of this story. 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. In the other gospel stories, Jesus tells the fishermen, “Follow me. Come after me,” and they followed him. Jesus’ word is powerful, authoritative, effective, and central. The people crowded him to hear the Word of God. Simon responded to Jesus’ word to put out into the deep and cast the nets. Simon and his fishing partners obeyed Jesus’ word, left everything, and followed him.

Is the Word at work in our lives and in our church today? Our Presbyterian, Reformed heritage values the Word and talks about the “centrality of the Word” in life and in worship. That doesn’t mean the sermon is the most important part of the worship service. It does mean that everything in worship is centered on and flows from the Word of God in the scriptures and from the living Word of God in Jesus Christ. Have you ever noticed the rhythm of our weekly worship services? We gather around the Word with our Opening Sentences, singing, and confession of sin. We proclaim the Word with the Children’s Sermon, the choir’s anthem, the scripture readings, and the sermon. We respond to the Word with our offerings and profession of faith. We seal the Word when we come to the waters of the baptismal font and come to the table to break bread and drink from the cup. We bear the Word into the world when we receive God’s charge and blessing in the benediction and go through those doors to live by God’s Word.

In both scripture readings this morning, we heard about the automatic reaction to hearing God’s Word and being in God’s presence.

When he saw the glory of the Lord, high and lofty, sitting on a throne, Isaiah said, “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!” (Isaiah 6:1, 5)

When he saw the huge catch of fish and the nets beginning to break and the boats starting to sink, Peter fell down at Jesus’ feet and said, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” (Luke 5:8)

When we are called to worship God on Sunday morning, we take time to confess our sin against God and our neighbors, before God and our neighbors.

After Isaiah confessed his sinfulness, he heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And Isaiah said, “Here am I; send me!” (Isaiah 6:8)

After Simon confessed his sinfulness, he heard the word of Jesus saying, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” (Luke 5:10)

After we confess our sinfulness before God and his people, we hear the Word of God and Jesus’ call, “Follow me!”

It’s good news that the Lord didn’t say to Isaiah, “You’re right. You are a sinner. I’ll have to find someone else.” Instead, he told Isaiah, “Go and say to the people . . .”

It’s good news that Jesus didn’t say to Simon, “You’re right. You are a sinner. I’ll have to find someone else.” Instead, he told Simon, “From now on you will be catching people.”

It’s good news that Jesus doesn’t say to us, “You’re right. You are a sinner. I’ll have to find someone else.” He still says to us, “Follow me.”

How will we respond to that word from **the** Word?

We might say, “Well, Lord, we’ve been working hard all through the years and we’ve got nothing to show for our efforts. We’re really not up for doing anything else. We think we know better; after all, we’ve been at this for quite a long time. Besides, we’ve never tried doing it the way you’re suggesting. We’re not sure we can do that . . .”

Or, we might say, “Well, Lord, we’ve been working hard all through the years, and sometimes we feel like we have nothing to show for our efforts, **but . . . still . . . yet . . . because** of your Word, we will do it.”

And, lo and behold, when we do what the Word calls us to do, we find that we’re goin’ places we’ve never been before, seein’ things we may never see again.

Let us pray: Merciful God, you call us to turn away from our selfish interests and to follow you, even if you lead us in a direction we would never have chosen for ourselves. Forgive us for being quick to question and hesitant to follow. Teach us to follow you without fear, knowing that you are always with us, leading the way. Amen.

NOTES

¹Information about the Sea of Galilee is taken from “Galilee, Sea of,” by Mary K. Milne in *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, Paul J. Achtemeier, General Editor (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985), p. 330.

²Luke 5:5-6 from *The Message*.