

Luke 5:1-16: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Luke chapter 5 verses 1 to 16 And Simon answered, For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon.

And Jesus said to Simon, Do not be afraid, from now on you will be catching men. And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him. While he was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy.

And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him, Lord, if you will, you can make me clean. And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, I will. Be clean.

And immediately the leprosy left him. And he charged him to tell no one, But go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, for a proof to them. But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.

[1 : 58] Jesus begins Luke chapter 5 by teaching by the side of Lake Gennesaret. He goes into a boat and teaches from just off the shore.

Within the book of Luke, it is always the lake of Gennesaret. In the other Gospels, we read about the Sea of Galilee or the Sea of Tiberias, whereas it tends to be lake throughout the Gospel of Luke.

Why the difference? In Mark, for instance, a great deal is made of the sea stories, the way in which Christ proves his power on the seas and demonstrates his glory to his disciples.

In Luke, however, there is a sea. But the sea is found in the second volume of his work, in the book of Acts. I think it's likely that Luke refers to the Sea of Galilee as the lake of Gennesaret, to hold some of that energy back until the book of Acts, where we will reach the sea, as Paul finally goes to Rome.

This is because the sea is associated with the Gentiles. In the Old Testament, there aren't many stories of the sea at all. We have stories of the land, of shepherds and sheep.

[3 : 03] There are only really two boat stories. The first, of course, is the story of the ark and Noah, and the second is the story of Jonah and the big fish. Both of these stories involve a more cosmic frame.

In Noah, it's the whole world that's being judged, and in the case of Jonah, he's sent to a Gentile people with a message from God. The boat is Simon's, and the boat is moved out a bit from the land, and Jesus teaches from it.

After the end of his teaching, he instructs Simon to put out into the deep and let down his nets for a catch. And he catches such a great multitude of fish that the net almost breaks.

He needs to be assisted by people in other boats, but the number of fish is so great that the boats themselves are almost sinking. Simon has others with him, but the narrative throughout is closely focused upon him as an individual.

Simon Peter, it's the first time in the Gospel that he's called Peter, is aware that he has been part of a miracle. Jesus is no ordinary man. Simon is instantly, acutely aware of his own sinfulness.

[4 : 07] He's responding to a theophanic event, an event in which the glory of God is displayed in physical manifestations. The power and the holiness of God reveal our own sinfulness by contrast.

Many see doctrines that highlight human sinfulness as arising from a pessimistic view of man. And what they fail to see is that more often than not, they find that origin in a glorious vision of God.

It's as we see God's holiness that we truly perceive our own sinfulness. The dazzling radiance of the Lord's glory reveals the grubby, grimy and ugly pollution of human sinfulness.

What's taking place here is reminiscent of the commissioning of the prophet Isaiah. When Isaiah sees the glorious vision of the Lord in the temple, his response is, Woe is me, for I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.

So Isaiah chapter 6 verse 5. And that response to a theophany is the same sort of thing that Peter is having here. The response of God in that instance is to send a seraphim with a coal from the altar.

[5 : 17] He touches the mouth of Isaiah and says, Behold, this has touched your lips. Your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for. And there is an implicit forgiving of Simon's sin here.

He's aware of his sin, and Christ tells him not to be afraid. His sin is forgiven. His guilt is not held against him. And he is going to be, like Isaiah, commissioned with a task to Israel.

He is told that he will be a fisher of men. The Gentiles, as dwellers in the sea, could be thought of as fish. Also, it's a way of thinking about those who are exiled, those who have been driven out of the land.

Jeremiah chapter 16 verses 15 to 16 is a previous use of the language of fishers in relationship to gathering human beings. For I will bring them back to their own land that I gave to their fathers. Behold, I am sending for many fishers, declares the Lord, and they shall catch them. And afterward I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain and every hill and out of the clefts of the rock.

[6 : 20] God is going to gather his people. And one of the means by which he's going to do that is sending fishermen after them. Jesus calls his disciples much as Elijah calls Elisha in 1 Kings chapter 19 verses 19 to 21.

In that passage, Elisha is engaged in a symbolically important task. And in a similar way, Simon's task and the miracle that is performed is a manifestation of his later calling.

1 Kings chapter 19. So he departed from there and found Elisha, the son of Shaphat, who was ploughing with 12 yoke of oxen in front of him. And he was with the 12th. Elijah passed by him and cast his cloak upon him.

And he left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you. And he said to him, go back again, for what have I done to you? And he returned from following him and took the yoke of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the yokes of the oxen and gave it to the people and they ate.

Then he arose and went after Elijah and assisted him. James and John are there with Peter. These are the three core disciples, their companions in their former profession and their former profession prefigures their spiritual calling.

[7 : 30] Simon has been told to put out into the deep, to leave the land. Simon will lead later on the boat of the church. The church is like a boat. It's part of the land that has gone out to sea.

It's a sign of his future mission. He will strike out from the land. He will go to a sea town, to Joppa. As Jonah went to Joppa before heading out to Tarshish, so Peter will be in Joppa where he receives this mission to go to Cornelius and to go to the Gentiles.

And as the Gentiles are brought the gospel of Christ, they will be gathered in. Peter will fulfill his calling as the fisher of men, the one who leads the church in this primary mission, going out into the deep, leaving the land behind.

He will pioneer that. And just as in this occasion he is assisted by his friends, James and John and his companions and colleagues, they are going to be there assisting him there too. We should also note the way that this sign is repeated in John chapter 21, when Peter is restored to his calling.

Jesus' statement to Simon that from that point on he will be catching men goes to him in particular. But clearly it includes James and John, and presumably also Andrew who's there with them. After this, Jesus heals a leper.

[8 : 46] Leprosy in scripture is not what we usually think of as leprosy. That is the condition called Hansen's disease. Rather, leprosy seems to be a type of skin condition, and that skin condition could be seen in part as a judgment of God upon the person.

While it certainly has that connotation in certain parts of the Old Testament though, we should not presume that it is the case every occasion when we meet it. Lepers would generally live away from larger bodies of population, so Jesus probably met the man in a more secluded location, as he's going through deserted areas.

Jesus is moved by pity at the man's plight, and he touches him. It's a means by which some would usually contract impurity. But when Jesus does this, he communicates wholeness.

This healing doesn't merely deliver the leper from a physical ailment, but it also delivers him from social isolation. He can now become part of the wider people again. Jesus instructs him not to say anything, and then sends him away.

He must present himself to the priest, and go through the prescribed process of cleansing. Jesus is immune from catching impurity, but the man must still observe the proper procedure. And this is a proof to the authorities.

[9 : 55] Perhaps there's some connotation of judgment there. However, although Jesus instructs the man not to tell anyone, the story seems to be told, and his fame spreads throughout the region. As a result, it's difficult for Jesus to do his work openly in towns anymore.

Rather, he has to go into desolate places, and in these desolate places he spends time in prayer. While we might think of the desolate places as places of communion with nature, of seeing the beauty of God's creation, and of enjoying solitude and communion with God, we should bear in mind the many times in which, in the New and the Old Testament, the wilderness is a place of demonic habitation.

Christ may be going to the front line, as it were, going to the place where the demons dwell, and engaging in the struggle of prayer. A question to consider.

How might the story of Simon and his encounter with Jesus in the miraculous catch of fish provide a paradigm for Christian experience more generally?