

“God Comes Even When We Say ‘Go Away’” Luke 5:1-11

Just like last week, our Gospel reading offers so many wonderful themes or ideas to preach on. We could focus on what it means to be called to faith in Christ – the cost of discipleship: that we must leave behind the life we once knew. We could focus on everything that Peter, Andrew, James, and John gave up for the sake of the Gospel.

We could focus on Jesus’ preaching style – that the crowds gathered around listening to Him because when Jesus spoke, He spoke the Word of God and as we heard last week, His message had authority.

We could talk about how preachers throughout the ages have noted the symbolism of this great catch of fish occurring at the time of Jesus calling His disciples and preparing them to be the carriers of the Gospel to the world. Early Church Fathers like Maximus of Turin and Cyril of Alexandria mention this in sermons. Martin Luther says that the sea is the world, the fish are people, the net is the preaching of the Gospel, and the boat is the church (Luther, Sermons, vol. 4, 164-165). Luther says: “It is our comfort, however, that Christ, through our preaching, will lead his own into the boat.” The church also had this in mind when it named the part of the sanctuary where the congregation resides the “nave” – Latin for “boat” or “ship.”

Any one of those topics would provide enough material to fill a sermon, or we could just scrap the whole thing and talk about last week's Super Bowl – as if the world needs more post-game analysis.

As I said, we could talk about a lot of things, but what intrigues me more than any other aspect of the events described in Luke's Gospel is Peter's response to the miracle of the great catch of fish. Peter falls at Christ's knees and says: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, oh Lord!" Upon hearing the Word of God preached, and witnessing the miracle, Peter knew who was in his boat. Now you might argue that Peter didn't yet know that God Himself was sitting in Peter's fishing boat. However, we learn from reading John's Gospel that, by this time, Peter's brother Andrew was a disciple of John the Baptist, was most likely present at Jesus Baptism where some pretty spectacular things happened, has already spent a full day listening to and interacting with Jesus. Andrew then brought Peter to meet Jesus and they are convinced that He is the Messiah, the Christ. And we know that it was understood by many that the Christ would be the Son of God.

When Jesus is on trial, Caiaphas, the high priest, says to Him, "If you are the Christ, tell us." Jesus replies, "If I tell you, you will not believe, and if I ask you, you will not answer. But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God." So they all said, "Are you the Son of God, then?" And He said to them, "You say that I am." [Lk. 22:66-70] And they tore their robes and said, "What further witnesses do we need. You have heard this blasphemy from His own lips.

If Caiaphas, who was not looking for the Messiah to come, knew that the Messiah, the Christ, would be the Son of God, it is not outrageous to think that someone like Peter, who is looking for the coming of the Messiah, would have the correct biblical understanding that the Christ is the Son of God. Even though we know that Peter expresses plenty of doubts along the way. Nevertheless, Peter was overwhelmed and felt totally unworthy to be in the presence of godliness.

Peter knew what kind of a person he was: “I am a sinful man.” One who is holy should not be associating with such a person – at least God should not be around after a bad night of fishing, where Peter more than likely had a few choice words for the fish that eluded his net.

We sometimes feel that God shouldn't be around at certain times of our lives. Oh, we feel comfortable praying at night before going to sleep because we are relaxed, tranquil, at peace with ourselves, and we feel at peace with God. We know that this is a good time to pray and have the Lord listening.

But the Lord tells us to pray without ceasing. This does not mean that you need to have a prayer book in your hand 24 hours a day. It means that in all situations: whether we are tranquil, frustrated, angry, even if we know we are sinning at the time. Luther says, “In the very moment in which you feel that the temptation is the strongest and that you are least prepared for prayer, go off into a solitary place (Matt. 6:6), and pray the Lord's Prayer or whatever you can say against Satan and his temptation (LW 12:318). God desires that we call upon His Name – in every trouble, pray, praise, and give

thanks, as the catechism says.

Our first instinct when faced with situations that have us acting in a not-so-Godlike manner is to put God on hold until we can figure things out or get them under control. But those are precisely the times that rather than doing like Peter and telling God: “Depart, go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!”; we need to say: “Lord, come, heal me quickly; I am a sinful man.” So long as God is out of the picture, or is viewed as an inconvenience or if our relationship with God is a chore, we will never “figure things out or get our lives under control.” We will remain as frustrated as Peter was when he spent the entire night fishing without even catching one fish for breakfast.

Only God can heal. Only God can save. As the angel of the Lord said to Isaiah who despaired for being a “man of unclean lips,” the angel said, “your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.” No matter what sin, fault, or mistake you make, in your Baptism and throughout your life of faith, God has promised to forgive His children. “Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

And especially when we think that God should not be around to see or hear what is going on; that is precisely the time when we need call upon His Name – and you might as well, because He is already there. As often as we say, “Depart from me, Lord; I am a sinful man! Go away for now!” the greatness of God is revealed in that He never leaves us or forsakes us. As the Lord has promised, “I am with you always to the very end of the age.” Amen.