

Epiphany 5 (C) – “More Able, No Doubt (With God’s Help)”

[RCL] Isaiah 6:1-8, [9-13]; Psalm 138; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

This week, because of our current study of “The Book of Joy, Lasting Happiness in a Changing World”, I was searching around on the Internet for video material related to the book. In the course of doing so, I came upon a book by the Archbishop Desmond Tutu called “An African Prayer Book”. It’s a compendium of prayers for all different occasions and moods from all over Africa. Prayers by specific people, many from Saint Augustine, for example, to prayers from the many different and varied countries of the continent from ancient times to today.

Bishop Tutu had written an introduction to each section of the book and I found his introduction to the section called Adoration particularly apropos for our reading from Isaiah this morning.

“All of us are by nature worshipful”, he says. “We may worship God to whom we ascribe his due, his worth. That is true worship. Or, we may give a false worship to money, to status, etc. When we listen to a superb Beethoven symphony, or something out of Handel’s Messiah, we are often speechless with wonder and awe. Are we not often awestruck before the grandeur of some imposing mountain range, or when we behold a glorious sunset, or a still, moonlit night with the stars winking in a dark blue sky? I once heard a venerable professor of gynecology, who must have delivered countless babies, confess that he was always overwhelmed by the wonder and mystery of a baby being born. I have heard that scientists wax ecstatic and break into poetic utterance because of the aesthetic qualities of some scientific experiment and the truth that it will have proven.

“On such occasions, words are often so utterly inadequate. The story goes of a farmer who used to sit in church for long periods of silence. When he was asked about this practice, he said of our Lord, “I look at him and he looks at me and it is enough.” We too have moments when we are struck speechless, as when we are stunned by the beauty of the snowcapped Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, or the majestic roar of the Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe. Our instinctive worshipfulness then comes to the fore with all these created things; how much more when we encounter the Source of it all--God, who is Beauty, Truth and Goodness? Then we want to fall down to worship and adore the one whose glory fills the heavens and the earth. “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.” “

From the awe we experience in the wonder of God’s creation to how inadequate we may often feel in the presence of the almighty, I was struck by a message from the Rev Canon Whitney Rice of the Diocese of Missouri posted on Sermons that Work this week. I greatly enjoy her writings and have used them on several occasions. This morning she tells us:

The message of all the people in our scriptures today is: “I’m not very good at this. I don’t think this is working.” That’s so often so true, isn’t it?

“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 says.

“I am the least of the apostles,” Paul says, “Unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.”

“Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing,” Peter says.

“I’m not very good at this. I don’t think this is working,” our scriptures say. Have you ever felt like that in life? In ministry?

There is one word that describes the feelings of all of our scripture writers this morning: futility. There is an overwhelming sense in these texts of seriously being about to give up. And futility is perhaps a feeling we can all identify with in year 3 of pandemic with ever-growing cultural conflicts. Many of us are perilously close to giving up on ourselves and those with whom we disagree. We’re starting to believe that change is *not* really possible. We’re starting to believe our efforts are futile.

This is the situation in our scriptures, and this is all too often the situation in our lives. Futility is a dangerous state. It robs us of hope, of possibility, of faith itself. This is where Peter is one early morning on the Lake of Gennesaret (also known as the Sea of Galilee). He and his companions have been out all night fishing and have caught nothing. They will have nothing to eat that day and nothing to sell that day. They also may be doubting their skills and capability as fishermen.

This is where the slow-rising tide of futility can land us. We don’t just begin to doubt what we can do. We begin to doubt who we are.

Then Jesus comes into the situation, and everything changes.

“When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, ‘Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.’ Simon answered, ‘Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.’ When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So 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.”

This story is about far more than just, “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.” One thing Jesus says here jumps off the page: “Put out into the deep water.” Let that phrase pierce your heart. “Put out into the deep water.” When we are feeling swamped by futility, we need to go deeper. When you can’t figure out what to do next, go deeper. When you are mad at everybody and everyone is mad at you, go deeper. When the tasks placed before you seem insurmountable, go deeper. When you feel like you have nothing but failure to show for your very best effort, go deeper.

“Put out into the deep water and let down your nets.”

What is the difference between beating our heads against a wall, i.e. doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results, and following Jesus’ advice?

Two things. Jesus asks us to return to the ground of our futility, the place of feeling stuck and stymied and sad, and go deeper there. Fish beneath the same assumptions and habits and patterns that we have used before. Ask ourselves harder questions. Give ourselves and others more time and more commitment.

And then do something radically different. Take Jesus with us. That is what changes the disciples’ action from “doing the same thing and expecting different results” into a sudden and bountiful harvest.

When Jesus is with us—in our minds, in our hearts, in our conversations, in our discernment, in our priorities, two things happen. First, we are empowered to go out into the deep water. We are able to take risks and stretch ourselves and each other toward something new. And then, we can let down our nets and actually find fish. What was once the site of futility becomes the site of abundance, discovery, and sustenance.

Notice one more interesting detail in this gospel text. At the end of the fishing part of the story, we read this sentence: “And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink.”

They began to sink? That sounds pretty problematic. Like, actually took on water and started to get alarmingly low in the frighteningly deep water? If they go down in the deep water, they’re in trouble. They’re a pretty good ways offshore. It might be hard if not impossible to swim back, and the disciples may not have the “walking on water” skills that Jesus has.

We don’t actually know how they dealt with it. Luke doesn’t tell us that they started rowing pell-mell for the shore, or had to chuck some of the fish out of the boat, or who knows what. Peter, in fact, is so overcome by the miracle that he either doesn’t notice or doesn’t care that the boat is about to sink. He falls to his knees before Jesus and says, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”

We do find out by the end of the story that they make it back to shore, but that detail that Luke includes is important. The boat begins to sink. Notice the significance of that in the context of the end of this story. This is Peter, James, and John’s call to ministry. Jesus says, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people,” and “When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.”

The boat begins to sink. This is a symbol of having to leave your old life behind. The boat was the fishermen’s primary tool of the trade, the economic engine of their lives. They needed that boat, and they needed it to stay afloat, so they and their families could stay afloat.

But when Jesus showed up, the bounty and abundance his presence brought into their lives completely overwhelmed their old worldview, their old tools, their old ways of living their lives. “Business as usual” just couldn’t stand up to following the call of Jesus. Saying yes to Jesus means we have to give up all our most cherished sources of security, to find true security and freedom in him.

And remember what the call is to Peter and his friends: to become fishers of people. This is about evangelism.

And that is surprising. We don’t expect energy and vocation around evangelism to be sparked out of being swamped by futility. Peter and his companions begin this story sad, frustrated, afraid, and almost hopeless. They don’t believe there are any fish, and they don’t believe that they have what it takes to catch them.

But Jesus says, “Put out into the deep water, and let down your nets for a catch,” and everything changes. The shamefaced group of failed fishermen are courageous new evangelists and followers of Jesus by the end of the story.

So ask yourself: where do I find futility in my life? Where do I feel like a failure? Where am I ready to give up? Where have I lost hope?

And then listen to the call of Jesus: “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch... Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.”

The road from failure to evangelist is quite short—it just requires saying yes to Jesus and saying yes to depth. What will you do?

The Rev. Canon Whitney Rice (she/her/hers) is an Episcopal priest who serves as the Canon for Evangelism & Discipleship Development for the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri. She is a graduate of Yale Divinity School, where she won the Yale University Charles S. Mersick Prize for Public Address and Preaching and the Yale University E. William Muehl Award for Excellence in Preaching. She has taught undergraduate courses at the University of Indianapolis and has contributed to Lectionary Homiletics, the Young Clergy Women’s Project journal Fidelia’s Sisters, and other publications. She has served as a researcher and community ministry grant consultant for the Indianapolis Center for Congregations and is currently a member of The Episcopal Church’s Evangelism Council of Advice. A communicator of the gospel at heart, she writes and teaches on a wide variety of topics, including rethinking evangelism, stewardship, leadership, women’s theology of the body, mysticism, and spiritual development. When she’s not thinking about theology, particularly the intersection of evangelism and justice work (which is all the time, seriously), you’ll find her swing dancing. Find more of her work at her website Roof Crashers & Hem Grabbers (www.roofcrashersandhemgrabbers.com).