

Echoing in Our Ears: Do Not Be Afraid
Swimming in Deep Water
Luke 5:1-11

No one likes a back seat driver. Literally, we don't like someone telling us from the passenger seat of the car that we should have made that last right turn, or that the lane just to the left might be a little clearer. Less literally, it's aggravating to get advice from someone who thinks they know our business better than we do. The text we heard from the Gospel of Luke this morning begins with one of those irritating moments. And it's Jesus who is offering advice.

Jesus is standing by the side of a lake, teaching people. Teaching is his job, what people expect him to do. And then, Luke tells us, Jesus sees two boats parked on the shore. The fishermen, who are busy doing *their* jobs, are out on the sand, washing their nets. They're *done* fishing. It hasn't been a very good night, and there wasn't much fish to catch, and they're not in a very good mood. But Jesus is not being very sensitive to their grumpiness, and he climbs right into the boat and just sits there. "Can you row out a little way?" he asks the boat's owner, Simon (whom we get to know later as Peter). Simon rolls his eyes a little—he's *busy*—but he obliges. He's a little curious too, about this young teacher and healer that everyone seems to be talking about.

This is all fine. It's a nice day, and bobbing in the water right off the shore is therapeutic; this God Jesus keeps talking about seems to be a lovely and peaceful, if sort of abstract, concept. Simon's in charge of the boat, which he knows like the back of his hand. And then Jesus steps over the line. "Row out into the deep water and let out your nets for a catch." *Now* he's treading on thin ice. Simon's ice. Jesus is not the fisherman; Simon is. And so Simon says, politely, "We've *already* been fishing...all night long. And we didn't catch anything." And he thinks to himself, not so politely, "I've been doing this for a long time; and I don't need you to tell me how to do my work!"

Even though he hasn't exactly been successful in his fishing, Simon Peter has a pretty firm fix on his reality. This is where you fish; this is a safe distance to go off-shore; this is how you do things. If sometimes you don't succeed, well, you live with it. That deep water where you think all the fish are, Jesus; I was out there once, a long time ago, and I *know* that water is dark and rough, and hard to manage and scary. You, Jesus, stick with the spiritual stuff. I'll take care of the fishing.

You know from the story that eventually Peter says OK, he'll do it; he'll venture out into the deep water and let down the nets where Jesus tells him to. You know that when those fishermen went out into the deep, they did find fish and catch them—hundreds of fish, so many that the nets almost broke and those little boats that had always been plenty strong before almost sank. This story is Luke's telling of how Jesus called his first disciples. But it's *this* space in the story, *before* they follow Jesus, that that I want to linger in for a moment longer, because I think it says much about who Simon Peter was when he heard Jesus' call, and about how *we* might hear that call when it comes to us.

Simon Peter is a regular guy. He wasn't on a vision quest; he was just doing things the way he's always done them before Jesus came along. And he's just had a bad day at work, so he's not feeling all that receptive to good fishing ideas from carpenters. But Jesus pushes through Peter's resistance. He's got something in mind; there's an urgency in what Jesus is calling these disciples for, even though no one else can see it yet.

There was something out in the deeper water, where your feet can't touch the bottom and the swirls are a little faster, and the waves are a little rougher, and you're not very comfortable, that Jesus saw and they couldn't. It was something good, something fulfilling, maybe even something life-changing. But Jesus can't get Peter out there to see unless he shakes him up a little. And so he does it—not by berating or criticizing Peter, but by startling him with a catch of fish that doesn't fit the regular pattern at all.

All of us live comfortably in a set of patterns, patterns that have formed out of the ways we've learned to live, how we react to the everyday duties and responsibilities of our lives. We don't often examine those patterns consciously; they're just there. They're helpful; patterns allow us to take care of the things we need to without about them too much. We're comfortable in our patterns. Rarely do we question them or change them. Like a favorite pair of old slippers or easy chair, they are just ours.

Fishing was that kind of pattern for Peter. He'd probably grown up around it; most likely his father was a fisherman, and his father before that. The routines of sailing, casting, bringing in the catch, cleaning the fish, getting them sold, caring for the equipment. Sometimes they worked well; sometimes they didn't; but he could do them...almost without thinking.

I get that. The thing that kept me practicing law for years longer than I was happy doing it was that I knew how to do it. I was reluctant to give up something that I'd gotten good at, felt comfortable doing. Even on the bad days, this was something I knew. I couldn't imagine being a *beginner* at something else, putting myself in the position of having to learn how to do something entirely new. And so for a long time, I was stuck in something that wasn't making me happy or fulfilled, but it was less risky—less disruptive, less frightening—than any alternative I could think of. I was Peter, rowing back the short distance to the shore after nights of meager fishing, but willing to just wash my nets and go back the next day to try again, to see if it might be different.

And then Jesus comes along and says, "That's not really working so well. There's a better way."

And how did Peter react when he heard Jesus talking to him about the work he thought he was the expert at? With joy? Gratitude? Curiosity? No—he fell on his knees. Maybe with awe, but maybe also with a little bit of resentment. "Go away from me, Lord, [Peter says] for I am a sinful man!" In other words, "Get out of here. I cannot deal with your messing around with my routine!"

As useful as our routines and patterns are in helping us get through our lives, the danger in them is that they can become prisons for us. We can get so comfortable in them that any suggestion we venture out can sound to us unfair, threatening. We react quickly, often by thinking, "I don't do that" or sometimes, "I can't do that." Sometimes we say, "You don't know what you're talking about."

That's *fear*. Fear that what has seemed like doing the best we can may not be enough. Fear that the bottom has dropped out of that shallow water we've been comfortably paddling around in, and we're being called out into deeper water where we can't see or touch the bottom. And often, whoever or whatever it is that has made it now *un-comfortable* for us to keep going as we always have before looks to us not like a teacher, but an enemy.

Jesus did not respond to Peter's discomfort by saying, "It's OK; go back to the shallow water and maybe tomorrow will be a better day." Instead, he said, "Do not be afraid. Follow me," Jesus said. "Bring everything you know about fishing, and together we will do something extraordinary."

Three notes, that I hope you will take away from this story.

The real Jesus—the one who we're not making up in our heads to make us feel better about ourselves—says, "I *need* you to stop being afraid. We have work to do." You don't look to Jesus if what you're looking for is simply to be affirmed in what you're already doing or who you already are. Because Jesus is always calling you into some new place, hoping you'll discover something else: who God *hopes* for you to be. Comfort is not always Jesus' first priority.

Second, I want to note the irony in this story: that the One who says, "Do not be afraid" is the same voice that says, "Go out into deeper water." Jesus never says, "There is nothing to fear." This is not a risk-free life he is inviting us to. He also does not say, "Make a safe place," or "Investigate first." He says, "Do not be afraid." It's not danger that keeps us from moving out into the water where all those good fish are swimming; it's our fear.

And finally, notice that this call to Peter didn't happen in a "holy" place--the temple or synagogue, or church. It happened at work. It could just as well have happened at home, while Peter was checking the balance in his retirement account or after a sleepless night worrying about one of his children. The call—to change your routine, to row out into deeper water--comes not to extraordinary, holy people, but to fishermen and office workers, teenagers and grandparents. Sometimes it comes in a coaxing voice, sometimes as a challenge, sometimes as an accident or loss that makes your old routines impossible. It comes to any of us; all of us. The call can come at any time, whether we are young and looking for our purpose or old and feeling settled, finished.

"Do not be afraid," our God says to us, over and over again. Let our hope be not to be kept from fearful things, but to be unafraid. Let our prayer be the one written by Sir Frances Drake many centuries ago:

*Disturb us Lord when
We are too well pleased with ourselves;
When our dreams have come true
Because we dreamed too little
When we arrived safely
Because we sailed too close to shore.*