

Introductory

This text has parallels in Matthew (4: 18-22) and Mark (1:16-20). In the TLH one-year lectionary, this text is appointed to be read on Trinity 5. In the LW three-year lectionary, this text is appointed for Epiphany 5C, Matthew 4: 12-23 is to be read on Epiphany 3A and Mark 1: 14-20 on Epiphany 3B. In LSB Matthew 4: 12-25 appointed for Epiphany 3A and Mark 1: 14-20 for Epiphany 3B.

This account of an incident that occurred near the beginning of Jesus' ministry is similar to, but different from the miraculous catch of fish related to us by John (21: 1-8). This incident is recorded by Luke as happening right after last week's text, which has Jesus doing miracles, and He ends up going about preaching in the synagogues of Judea. Now He goes out to expand the staff.

Textual Notes

1. NIV says that people were "crowding around" Jesus, which is not wrong. KJV has that they "pressed upon Him," which is right, and (LBT) most of the rest follow that KJV lead. If you look at the other six occurrences of the verb "ἐπικειμαι" in the NT – it's the kind of thing where people are in a panic to get out of the burning building and other people get trampled, perhaps to death.

Why were they physically jostling one another to get closer to Jesus? In a way most Americans would not, "Ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν τῷ τὸν ὄχλον ἐπικεῖσθαι αὐτῷ καὶ ἀκούειν τὸν λόγον τοῦ Θεοῦ - it came to pass in the crowd to press upon Him to hear the Word of God." The prepositional phrase in the dative case "ἐν τῷ τὸν ὄχλον" has Him being a part of the crowd, standing next to them.

A rare sight in America, it's a common occurrence in much of the world. I remember talking to a man from Madagascar in Ft. Wayne about ten years ago. He recounted how tens of thousands would come to church on Sunday and they would put loudspeakers outside for the overflow. I asked if he's talking about the entire country. No, just one church, and they had multiple services.

People who have been under the thumb of Satan forever – see the Bennett book – when they are exposed to Christianity, they like what they see. The same can be said for people whose only choice had been Islam or Buddhism or pick your false religion. This is the kind of rock star status held by Jesus of Nazareth at this time among the masses. The religious leaders – not so much.

Sometimes I feel like a broken record, talking about the importance and power of the Word, but what is it that's drawing these people to Jesus? They were pressing to hear the Word of God, "καὶ αὐτὸς ἦν ἐστὼς παρὰ τὴν λίμνην Γεννησαρέτ – and He was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret. This body of water is common to us as the Sea (Lake) of Galilee and also as the Sea of Tiberius.

2. With the crowds pressing like they were, He seems to be looking for relief, “καὶ εἶδεν πλοῖα δύο ἐστῶτα παρὰ τὴν λίμνην – He saw two boats sitting on the lake.” Boats, but not much good without a boat driver, “οἱ δὲ ἄλεις ἀπ’ αὐτῶν ἀποβάντες ἔπλυνον τὰ δίκτυ – but the fishermen from them had gone out and were washing their nets.” The word for washing is “πλύνω,” rare in the NT.

Looking here and at the other two occurrences in the NT, both in Revelation, both in regard to washing robes, the word seems to mean “to immerse.” Isn’t that how you wash clothing? So to review, the general verb for “to wash” is “βαπτίζω,” used to refer to various modes of washing. That’s the word the NT uses when talking about Christian Baptism, never this word “to immerse.”

That word (πλύνω – to immerse) was known to Jesus and the NT writers, and they could have used it in connection to Christian Baptism, but they did not. They used the general word for washing because the mode of washing in Baptism – dip, sprinkle, pour, or immerse – is not important, and those who make that into a law, saying the immersion is the only mode acceptable are wrong.

3. So the crowds are physically pressing in on Him – they are probably touching Him, He sees a boat – He acts like He owns the thing “ἐμβὰς δὲ εἰς ἓν τῶν πλοίων, ὃ ἦν Σίμωνος, ἠρώτησεν αὐτὸν ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς ἐπαναγαγεῖν ὀλίγον – having boarded the boat – which was Simon’s – He asked him to put off a little from the land.” This action by Jesus implies a certain familiarity with Peter.

Do you go out to a dock and just willy-nilly board a stranger’s boat? Even if you know the owner and maybe are friend or family, you get permission before you get onto the boat. As this thing plays out, it’s clear that Jesus and Peter are familiar with one another, and that they in fact have what we would call a relationship. Go out a little bit from the shore, but not – there, that’s good.

The people want Jesus to teach them about God, but the jostling crowd is not a venue conducive to that. There’s more than one way to skin a cat, and “καθίσας δὲ ἐκ τοῦ πλοίου ἐδίδασκεν τοὺς ὄχλους – and sitting down, from the boat He was teaching the people.” Sitting is the posture of teaching, and the verb “teaching” is in the imperfect tense – He started teaching and He kept it up.

4. We don’t know for how long He preached, but certainly not for more than eight minutes. I’m joking. Because of a lack of TV and the like, their attention span was longer than ours, wasn’t it? Was it? I went nearly 28 minutes a couple of weeks ago and since we eliminated passing the plate and went to continuous flow communion, I can go 24 most Sundays and still stay under the limit.

I used to do a preaching workshop that went 9:00 to 4:00 with a lunch break. It can be done, and I’m not the only one who can do it. If you are a good speaker, I’ll stay and listen for as long as you are still talking. If you aren’t, then you’ve lost me well before eight minutes, probably at one minute of less. See how God, Jesus, and Aristotle talk. They all make use of classical rhetoric.

So after an unspecified amount of time had passed with Him teaching, “ὥς δὲ ἐπαύσατο λαλῶν, εἶπεν πρὸς τὸν Σίμωνα Ἐπανάγαγε εἰς τὸ βάθος, καὶ χαλάσατε τὰ δίκτυα ὑμῶν εἰς ἄγρην – and

when He had stopped preaching, He said to Peter, ‘Put out into the deep, and let down your nets for a catch.’” I don’t know much about fishing, but I think deep water is better than shallow.

5. Peter does know much about fishing, and he protests the order, “καὶ ἀποκριθεὶς Σίμων εἶπεν Ἐπιστάτα, δι’ ὅλης νυκτὸς κοπιάσαντες οὐδὲν ἐλάβομεν – and answering, Simon says ‘Master, through the night we have toiled, and have taken nothing.’” Peter addresses Jesus not by the common “κύριος – Lord,” but by the uncommon “Ἐπιστάτα,” what we would call commander.

The very common word – commonly translated “Lord” – is translated like that because that was the best word to use for κύριος in 17th century English. In the 400 years since – in the normal development of the English language – the word has become the word used of Jesus, and only of Jesus. Who else do you ever address as “Lord?” The basic meaning of the word has changed.

And none of us ever even think of the Lord of the Manor when we hear or use the word “Lord,” and a lot of people – especially outside of England – would not know what that term means. If we peruse the way the word “Ἐπιστάτα,” the word used by Peter to address Jesus here in the NT, Peter is here is acknowledging that Jesus is in control of the comings and goings of him and his boat.

He confirms that by saying “ἐπὶ δὲ τῷ ῥήματί σου χαλάσω τὰ δίκτυα – but at your word, I will let down the nets.” What an incredible thing! When I go fishing, and the guy takes me out on the boat, never do I ever tell him where to go. He’s the one who knows the waters, he’s the one who knows where the fish will be and when, and yet Peter submits when Jesus tells him where to go.

I think He’s going somewhere with this thing.

6. It worked, “καὶ τοῦτο ποιήσαντες συνέκλεισαν πλῆθος ἰχθύων πολὺ – and having done this, they netted a lot of fish.” How many fish did they land? Enough fish so that, “διεμήσσετο δὲ τὰ δίκτυα αὐτῶν – now their nets were tearing,” an imperfect verb tense meaning that their nets began to tear from the weight of so many fish, and the nets kept being ripped apart by the catch.

7. Thinking quickly, “καὶ κατένευσαν τοῖς μετόχοις ἐν τῷ ἑτέρῳ πλοίῳ τοῦ ἐλθόντος συλλαβέσθαι αὐτοῖς – and they signaled to their partners in the other boat, who had come to help them.” The first verb is a hapax logomena (only occurs once) in the NT, and we look to the secular literature to determine that it means not an audible but a visible communication, a nod or wave of the hand.

The uncommon word “partners” means that they were working together. I would say they were waving like crazy using the universal signal for “get over here, and hurry,” and probably saying that, but they probably out of range of hearing. It worked, “καὶ ἦλθαν, καὶ ἔπλησαν ἀμφοτέρα τὰ πλοῖα ὥστε βυθίζεσθαι αὐτά – and they came and filled both of the boats so that they were sinking.”

It’s interesting, the word “βυθίζω – to sink” is another Greek word Jesus and the NT writers could have used had they wanted immersion to be the only mode acceptable for Christian Baptism. But

they did not. They chose to use the general word for “to wash,” like we would use for washing dishes and clothing and the car and our bodies – but we use different modes for different washings.

8. Peter recognizes himself anew as a mere mortal in the presence of the divine, “ἰδὼν δὲ Σίμων Πέτρος προσέπεσεν τοῖς γόνασιν Ἰησοῦ – Seeing, Peter fell at the knees of Jesus,” the normal posture for worship, and he says worshipful words, “λέγων Ἐξελθε ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ, ὅτι ἀνὴρ ἁμαρτωλός εἰμι, Κύριε – saying leave me, for I am a sinful man, Lord,” and the verb is in the imperative mode.

I have been known to criticize Peter for his various human shortcomings, but here we must commend him for having the faith to go where the builder told him to go to catch fish, and now for his knowing to stay in his own lane when it comes to Jesus. Having seen the miracle of the large catch – he had no doubt seen Jesus do miracles before, including healing his wife’s mother.

9. He takes the posture he takes before Jesus and says what he says because, “θάμβος γὰρ περιέσχεν αὐτὸν – astonishment grabbed him.” The astonishment was all pervasive to his person, and not only Peter, but “καὶ πάντα τοὺς σὺν αὐτῷ – all who were with him,” about what? They were in a state of astonishment “ἐπὶ τῇ ἄγρᾳ τῶν ἰχθύων ἣ συνέλαβον – at the catch of fish they had taken.”

For Peter the fisherman, to see demons cast out and sick people healed was one thing, but clearly to see what he sees here is a horse of a different color. Medicine was not Peter’s vocation, and when Jesus healed his mother-in-law – people get over fevers all the time. Sick people get well all the time, but to see demons cast out and the assembly line of all-night healing were impressive.

But what happened here – things like that just don’t happen! Peter and the people who helped his boat with their catch knew about catching fish, and they understood that what they had just seen could only be because of the supernatural. It’s why Peter reacted to Jesus like he did. As a practical matter, Jesus has yet to feed five or even four thousand, and fish were a staple of their diet.

Fish was man’s protein for most of our existence, especially in places that were close to bodies of water. The widespread consumption of pork and chicken, and especially beef, is relatively recent. More fish meant more meat, and if you were in the fishing business, you had to wonder at this great catch and the dollar signs must have been flashing in front of their collective eyes.

10. James and John are now brought into the story, “ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ Ἰάκωβον καὶ Ἰωάννην υἱοὺς Ζεβεδαίου – likewise James and John, sons of Zebedee,” who are described as “οἱ ἦσαν κοινωνοὶ τῷ Σίμωνι – they were partners with Peter.” The word for “partners” here is stronger than the word for “partner” earlier (7). Were those “partners” James and John at first unnamed, now named?

The noun “κοινωνός” occurs nine more times in the NT, and its cognate verb is quite common. It means an equality of sharing in common things, and it indicates here that the Sons of Zebedee were partners who would have shared their catches – whether for better or for worse. It was and still is a common way of insuring that a person’s income is more steady and less volatile.

Jesus speaks to the kneeling Peter, “καὶ εἶπεν πρὸς τὸν Σίμωνα ὁ Ἰησοῦς Μὴ φοβοῦ· ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν ἀνθρώπους ἔσῃ ζωγρῶν – and Jesus says to Peter, ‘stop being afraid, from now you will be catching men.’” It’s an interesting combination of astonishment and fear that Peter feels at seeing what he has just seen. It’s not an either/or, but it’s a both/and for him and for all Christians.

11. Out on the sea, in the deep water, probably out of sight and most certainly out of the hearing of the land lubbers, “καὶ καταγαγόντες τὰ πλοῖα ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν, ἀφέντες πάντα ἠκολούθησαν αὐτῷ - and bringing the boats to the land, leaving all they followed Him.” We note again that Apostles and Seminarians are the people who leave all behind, and the general Christian does not have to.

Jesus told only Peter that he would be fishing for men, and James and John dropped their all to follow Him as well. This is clearly a metaphor. No Apostle is using a net or a boat to catch men. The point is similar to the Sower and the seed, where no seed is involved, except that it’s a metaphor familiar to Peter and the other fishers, one they would have understood better than me.

The take-away here is that in doing what they are being called to do – they will be sent out to spread Christianity – you should fish where Jesus tells you to fish. When Jesus sends them out, He tells them where to go and where not to go. When Paul and other missionaries go out in Acts, it is the Church – also called The Holy Spirit – who tells them where to go and where not to go.

The Holy Spirit – the Church – Jesus, do that today. I did not apply for the job of Pastor at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Grand Mound, Iowa. Nor do missionaries tell the Mission Board where they are going, nor to Seminary professors or any called worker tell the Church where they are going – or not. And what kind of a catch will we get? That’s hard to say and its variable.