

A COLOSSAL CATCH
Luke 5:1-11

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We are no longer surprised that Jesus is able to draw a crowd, a multitude. Just before our present passage we learn that while Jesus was trying to be alone, the multitudes were “searching for him” (Luke 4:42). Having witnessed his healing power, the crowd was ready to take this new teacher, Jesus, as their own possession. Luke describes, “[The multitudes] tried to keep him from going away from them.” Already, the masses have also been amazed by the fact that even the demons of darkness respond to his rebuke (Luke 4:34-35). Astonishment washed over the crowd as they pondered, “What is this message? Who is this man? He even has authority over the unclean spirits” (Luke 4:36).

As a result of his power over darkness and disease, the word about Jesus spread to all the surrounding towns (Luke 4:37). Not only had they seen Jesus demand the departure of the demons, they also saw him healing one with a high fever. Setting the stage for Simon’s forthcoming call to be a fisher of men, Luke first reminds us that Jesus healed Simon’s mother-in-law, rebuking her fever (Luke 4:38-39). Healing at the hands of Jesus, moreover, was not a rare occasion. Even while darkness was approaching, the multitudes brought everyone who was sick and in need of healing to Jesus (Luke 4:40). Luke has, therefore, prepared his readers to know that the multitudes seek Jesus and stand in awe of his message. And, more specifically, Peter himself has already witnessed the power of Jesus.

Listening to the Word of God (Luke 5:1)

Luke begins chapter 5 with one of his familiar constructions, “Now it came about...” This particular formula is found frequently in Luke (5:12, 17; 8:1, 22; 9:28, 51; 14:1; 17:11; 19:15; 24:4, 15; also Acts 5:7; 9:19). In Luke, this particular construction marks a “new beginning.” We might think of this introduction, “Now it came about...,” as beginning a new chapter in Luke’s collection of Jesus stories. As in the prior chapter, chapter 4, the multitudes begin to press around Jesus, making their demands (see 4:42-43). More specifically, the multitudes are seeking to hear the “word of God.” In context, the designation “word of God” is comprehensive in nature, representing Jesus’ message about the kingdom of God (see also 4:43).

“Hearing” Jesus is never enough, however, as this particular story makes clear. Like it or not, the kingdom of God always demands a comprehensive response, calling upon sinners to repent. As he teaches the growing multitude, Jesus is standing by “the lake of Gennesaret.” As readers of the New Testament, we are more familiar with the designation of this body of water as “the Sea of Galilee.” Gennesaret is the name of the fertile area west of the lake (see Mark 6:53 or Josephus, Jewish War 3.506).

Washing Their Nets (Luke 5:2)

The night had been endless, and the fish had been few. As a result, the fishermen were surely disappointed and downcast as they began the arduous task of removing the rubbish and debris from their nets. We can only imagine the sense of defeat found in these future disciples, as they had nothing to show for a full night of fishing. As the crowd edges closer and closer to him, Jesus notices the two boats where the downcast fishermen are cleaning their nets. Two boats are indicated because of the partnership between James and John (the sons of Zebedee) and Simon (and Andrew? He is Peter's brother, but is not mentioned in this account. Compare Matthew 4:18).

Teaching the Multitudes (Luke 5:3)

Using the boat as a platform and the water and the hillside as a natural amphitheater, Jesus begins to teach the crowd. New Testament scholar David Garland has noted the sloping amphitheater—which lies halfway between Capernaum and Tabgha—which provides excellent natural acoustics to carry Jesus' voice to the crowd. As was the custom of his day, Jesus sat (in the boat) as he began to teach. Jesus now uses the very boat from which Peter had fished for fish to now fish for the souls of men.

Fishing Boats from the First Century

Brothers Moshe and Yuval Lufan, fishermen and amateur archeologists, made a wonderful discovery when they actually located an ancient fishing boat in the Sea of Galilee. This 1986 discovery fulfilled a long-term dream of the Lufan brothers, who are descendants of generations of Galilean fishermen. When drought conditions lowered the water level on the lake, the brothers stumbled across part of the remains that had long been buried in the shore. Professional archeologists followed up on the discovery and affirmed that the find was of great historical importance. Working feverishly for twelve days and nights, digging teams were able to unearth the boat before the water rose again. The actual dating of the boat is from 120 B.C.–A.D. 40. The boat was constructed of cedar planks and joined together by pegged mortise and tenon joints and nails. The boat measured 26.5 feet long, 7.5 wide, and 4.5 feet in depth. Alternatively, it could be powered by either sails or oars. Given its size, it had the capacity of a crew of five, with possible space for ten passengers and an excess of a ton of cargo. Most likely, this boat closely resembles the very boat in our text today.

Letting Down the Nets (Luke 5:4)

A reading of the original text makes clear that the order "put out" is a command in the singular form. Jesus, therefore, is commanding one man, Peter, to push the boats out into the deep. Apparently, the crew is under Peter's command. The next command, "let down," however, is in the plural, indicating that the whole crew would be involved in the catch. Jesus is not merely suggesting that he might know "a better fishing hole." He is, on the contrary, commanding them to drop their nets in order for a sure catch.

Working Hard All Night (Luke 5:5)

However faint, the response of Simon Peter is certainly a protest. Perhaps this first protest, coming even before the actual call of the disciples, sets us up for the future, when the disciples would protest again and again. Here is a list of the disciples' protests in Luke:

Luke 8:24. “Master, Master, we are perishing!”—uttered by the disciples right before Jesus stills the storm.

Luke 8:45. “Master, the people are crowding and pressing in on You”—uttered by Peter when Jesus poses the question, “Who is the one who touched Me?” as he feels healing power go forth from him.

Luke 9:13. “We have no more than five loaves and two fish”—uttered when Jesus commands his disciples to give the 5,000 men and their families something to eat.

Luke 18:28. “Behold, we have left our own homes and followed You”—also uttered by Peter when Jesus tells the story of the rich young ruler who was requested to sell everything and give it to the poor.

The emptiness of the nets preceding the command of the Christ is a clear indication that—on their own—the fishermen have nothing to show but empty nets for their all-night-long efforts.

Unlike the other Gospel writers, who often use the word “rabbi,” Luke prefers the word “Master.” The term carries with it the idea of one who exercises authority over others. In Luke’s Gospel, the term is used by both the disciples (8:24, 45; 9:33, 49) and lepers who are seeking cleansing (17:13).

Curiously, Jesus commands them to put out into the deep during the daytime. As seasoned fishermen, Peter, James, and John are well aware that the best time for a catch has already long passed. During the cover of darkness, fish are not able to see and evade the nets. Besides, if they just come up with another failed attempt, the nets will have to be picked clean and washed all over again. Peter indicates that he is only willing to cast the nets into the deep because the Master has bid him do so.

Breaking the Net (Luke 5:6-7)

What happens next finds the fishermen unaware. The catch is literally described as “a great multitude,” so much so that Luke says, “The nets were about to break.” With this colossal catch of fish, we gain immediate insight into this “Master” who seems to know too much. David Garland draws three conclusions from verse 6: (1) Jesus had prophetic powers to know what will happen; (2) obedience to Jesus’ word leads to success; and (3) the catch becomes a symbol of the mission to which Jesus will call Simon.

The crew in Peter’s boat “signaled” to their partners. The original text literally reads, “They signaled by nodding their heads.” Imagine it this way: The fishermen are in a strain, with their hands holding the nets. All their strength is engaged in carrying this magnificent catch. Unable to let go of the nets, they nod with their heads, frantically signaling the other boat to come help with the catch. New Testament scholar John Nolland has noted that it was common for boats to work in pairs. As result of obedience to the word of Jesus, both boats are filled to the brim with fish, so much so that they begin to go under.

Falling Down At His Feet (Luke 5:8)

Luke identifies our fisherman by both names, “Simon Peter.” Jesus, however, has not yet given Simon his new name. We learn in Luke 6:14 that, in fact, Jesus later named Simon “Peter.”

It would be hard to make too much of Simon’s dramatic response following the catch of fish. Suddenly, he realizes that he is in the presence of a holy being, and he falls at Jesus’ feet. Much like Isaiah’s vision of God (Isaiah 6), Peter is made fully aware of his own inadequacies, his own sinfulness, as he comes so close to the Holy One.

In Isaiah, when the prophet sees the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, he shouts out, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts” (Isaiah 6:5).

While we might suppose that Peter would be focused on gratitude for the financial gift of the fish, he is, rather, focused on his sinful appearance before a holy Lord. Eugene Lowry says, “It was wonderful, as in wonder; it was marvelous, as in marvel; it was terrific, as in terrify.”

So quickly, Peter realizes that this miracle concerns more than just a multitude of fish. It concerns the very identity of this new teacher. Of foremost importance is the fact this fisherman, Simon, is the first person in the gospel to call Jesus “Lord.” On this occasion, the name is used in all of its glory. Earlier, Luke has used the title to refer to the God of Israel (Luke 1:43; 2:11), and now he uses it to describe Jesus!

If someone asked you to share your “beliefs” in just three words, what words would you utter? Could you do it? I am fully aware that I would have to give you pages, maybe even books, in which to write all that you hold to be true. But as we read the letters and writings of the earliest Christians, we discover that everything they believed, all that they held dear, could be summarized in the most profound statement ever articulated in human history: “Jesus is Lord!”

All of Christian history, every word of scripture, revolves around this central confession of the Lordship of Christ Jesus. New Testament scholar Robert H. Mounce declared that “Jesus is Lord” was Christianity’s “earliest single-clause Christological confession.” Another New Testament scholar, George Ladd, called Jesus’ Lordship “the heart of the early Christian confession.” Paul summed it up best: “If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9). Finally, Paul envisioned a day when every member of the human race, both the living and the dead, would bow the knee to Jesus—much as Peter has done in this passage—and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Philippians 2:11).

Simon’s confession of his sinfulness, along with the acknowledgment of Jesus as Lord, combine to foreshadow much of Luke’s message—forgiveness for sinners is found in Jesus (Luke 5:30, 32; 7:34, 39; 15:1-2, 7, 10; 18:13; 19:7). Oddly enough, in Luke’s Gospel, those who see themselves as sinners respond to the message of the kingdom while those who see themselves as virtuous, above sinners, miss the message of the Messiah altogether.

Calling For a New Kind of Catch (Luke 5:9-10)

The crew casting the nets were amazed at this miraculous haul of fish. In these verses, we are also introduced to the brothers, the sons of Zebedee, James and John, who are fishing partners with Simon and, most likely, his brother Andrew. Even as Simon is seized with fear over his sinfulness, Jesus offers comfort, “Do not fear” (see also Luke 8:150; 12:32). These are the same words of solace that the angel gave in the birth story of Jesus (Luke 1:13, 30; 2:10). Jesus is not fleeing from Simon, a sinner, but, rather, seeking to save him and recruit him to save others.

Don’t miss the words “from now on.” Luke uses this construction in his Gospel to indicate a fundamental change in the state of affairs. Today, we might translate it “from this day forward!” At this very moment, and until his death, Peter will be focused on drawing men in with the kingdom net.

Leaving Everything to Follow Him (Luke 5:11)

The New Testament image of a disciple is always that of a “follower.” And those who choose to follow this teacher cannot carry along baggage. In fact, Luke describes them as “leaving everything” in order to go after this teacher.

How do we respond to Jesus? The crowds are simply “amazed” (Luke 4:36). The folks from Nazareth attempt to push him off a cliff (Luke 4:29). And the religious leaders will soon call him a blasphemer (Luke 5:21). Simon, in contrast, is set forth in Luke as having the “right response” to our Lord. Confess. Repent. And answer Jesus’ call to catch more people for the kingdom.