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Epiphanies: What a Catch!

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TEXT: Luke 5:1-11 (NIV)

On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men." And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

When I was still leading and serving a congregation, one of the more enjoyable roles I played over the years was that of evangelism trainer. I taught courses like Evangelism Explosion and Becoming a Contagious Christian to train people how to share their faith in Jesus Christ. Every one of those courses emphasized the value of having a personal testimony ready, describing how you came to know Christ and the difference he's made in your life. So, I had people write short testimonies and memorize them to always have on hand when in conversation with others. It was fun and inspiring for me to listen to

these people tell their stories. A few had dramatic beginnings, but most were not. But they all were great because they all pointed to the great worth of knowing Jesus Christ. I mention this because I couldn't help but wonder how the apostle Peter would have begun his personal testimony about his life with Jesus. Can you imagine? "Peter, how did you come to know Jesus?" "Well, it all began in a boat fishing with Jesus."

Today we have before us a miracle and Simon Peter's call to ministry. Both things occurred suddenly, unexpectedly, dramatically in Peter's fishing boat. The call followed a miraculous catch of fish that almost sunk the boat after Peter followed Christ's instructions. This fisherman's eyes were opened in this encounter with Jesus, and he knew in his heart of hearts that he was in the presence of the divine. Between hearing the word of God from this teacher who commandeered his boat for his pulpit and then the gargantuan catch of fish, Peter had an epiphany about this Jesus, a revelation. As is the case throughout scripture, when the holiness and purity of the divine God was personally encountered, an awakened sense of unholiness and uncleanness came over Simon Peter. He saw himself for who he really was: a sinful man. He now feared for his life because of it. He knew he had no business being in the presence of such holiness and purity. So, getting down on his knees before Jesus in the middle of all those fish in the boat, all Peter could say to Jesus was "Go away from me, Lord, I'm a sinful man." Notice he called him Lord, which means God. Kind of like the prophet Isaiah in the temple who encountered God and said, "Woe is me for I am a man of unclean lips." This was also a confession. "I'm not worthy to be close to you, Lord. This could be the death of me." But then, as Peter was trembling with fear before Jesus, he heard those unexpected words from our lord a-calling. "Don't be afraid. From now on, you will catch people." In other words, "I have plans for you, Peter. There are bigger fish to catch than these. You will catch people for God."

Now, in that statement, we have the ultimate purpose of Jesus being revealed to us: people... people who need God in their lives, which means every one of us. Human beings were created for a relationship with God, but that relationship was soon broken because of sin. Ever since, all of us are marked as sinners and fall short of the glory of God – it separates us from him. All human beings are lost now and for eternity without that relationship with God. Jesus' mission was to seek and to save lost people: to bring us back to God. That's why he went without any protest to the cross. He was simply fulfilling God's plan to make payment for our sinfulness so that we might be forgiven and restored into a relationship with God. So, Christ's mission was all about rescuing

people. And Jesus wanted to bring Peter and his fishing partners, James and John, along with him on this rescue mission, to train them and get them ready to catch lost people themselves with the gospel message. So, Peter and his partners pulled up the boats to shore and left everything behind, and they followed Jesus. I can't help but wonder who cleaned all those fish left behind in those boats. We'll never know.

There are actually two epiphanies in this story. First, the miraculous catch of fish, which gave Peter that glimpse of Jesus' divinity. Upon witnessing this miracle, he knelt before God and called him Lord, meaning God. Why? Because Jesus exercised God-like authority, even over nature, over the fish, as we see in this episode. It's important that we get this right about Jesus, that he's true God as well as true man. As man, he did fully experience our humanity with all its frailties and strengths and joys and sorrows and pains and disappointments in times of hunger and hardships. But he is also true God, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary; begotten, not made, of one being with the father; who said "Whoever has seen me has seen the father." And he was without sin, making him the perfect sacrifice for humanity's sinfulness. Only a perfect sacrifice could pay for my sins and open the way to a relationship with our holy God. And that was Jesus: true God, true man. As pastor and author John Stott wrote about this:

The Divinity of Christ, the humanity of Christ and the righteousness of Christ uniquely qualified Jesus to be humanity's redeemer. If he had not been man, he could not have redeemed men. If he had not been a righteous man, he could not have redeemed unrighteous men. And if he had not been God's son, he could not have redeemed men for God or made them the sons of God. So, in Jesus, we discover all of God we can know. And in Jesus, we have all of God we need.

John Newton, a converted slave trader, a preacher, a hymn writer of such hymns like *Amazing Grace*, said near the end of his life, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great savior." And he is a great savior because he's God in the flesh who takes away the sin of the world. He's our salvation. But this epiphany about Jesus was not given simply for our intellectual ascent, but to move us into action. We see that in the story of Peter, don't we? Jesus is not simply someone to be admired, but worshipped and declared Lord of Heaven and Earth and Lord over our lives, believing that he's true God who we will trust and serve and obey. I mean, if Jesus really is true God, as this story shows us, then we will say "Lord, anywhere you will touches my life, anywhere your word speaks, I'll say, 'Lord, I

will obey.'” There are no conditions any more. If he's really God, he can't just be a supplement for us. We have to come to him and say, “OK, Lord, I'm willing to let you start a complete reordering of my life.”

I need to ask you: have you given Jesus your boat, your life, your dilemmas or heartaches, turned it all over to him? This story from Luke is encouraging us to do that, to bend our knees before him and actually yield ourselves to him, giving him complete control and ownership of our lives; to worship him because he's worthy of that. So, have you been trusting and surrendering yourself to Jesus Christ? He's so much more than a great teacher, a philosopher, or a prophet from a religion, or another great historical figure that we need to acknowledge. He's true God, and he's come to step into your life and save you from sin and death and lead you down a new path with him at the helm – a new path with God that lasts forever.

So that's the first epiphany for us to behold and to act upon in this story. But there's another one. The other epiphany, perhaps for us, more importantly, was Jesus' gracious calling of a sinful fisherman to do kingdom work – to reel spiritually dying people in to receive a new life of God. Peter and his partners would do this by announcing to people the saving message of God's gracious actions for them through Jesus Christ. Of course, the rest is history, right? Peter and his partners responded positively, and went with Jesus, they didn't know exactly what they were getting into, but they went into training under Jesus for three years. And Peter was correct in saying that he's a sinful person. We saw that, see that again and again. He proved it to us. He did a lot of stupid things along the way and said a lot of stupid things. And he ultimately let Jesus down, denying he even knew him when Jesus was arrested and sentenced to die in a cross. He broke down and wept after he did this terrible thing and ran away. And on Easter Sunday, though, after hearing the woman's report, he sprinted to the tomb, where Jesus had been laid and found it empty. And later that day, he saw the risen Christ face to face and he wasn't turned away. And a few days after that, he was issued a new call from Jesus to feed and tend his sheep as the disciples ate breakfast with the risen savior by the Sea of Galilee. And the Holy Spirit-filled Peter preached a sermon then on Pentecost in the city of Jerusalem, and three thousand people repented and were baptized for the forgiveness of sins as they received Christ as their savior and lord. How's that for a catch? After that, Peter was used by God in great ways to catch many, many people for his kingdom.

It's all quite amazing when you think about it. And that's our epiphany. It appears this God man, Jesus Christ, can use anyone for his rescue mission – even sinful, broken, ordinary people like me and you. God works in mysterious and strange ways, doesn't he? He taps the shoulder of the most unlikely people – not saints, but sinners – and then he uses them in amazing ways to his glory. Even a sinful fisherman or a tax collector or a persecutor of the church or a German law student or a ballplayer named Sunday, or a shoe salesman named Moody, an atheistic journalist like Dorothy Day, an attorney named Colson... and yes, even flawed and imperfect people like you and me. I find this epiphany inspiring, don't you? It's not so much that Jesus accepts us as we are, but that he sees us for what we can become when we allow him to have his way with us as we repent of our sin and turn in trust to him for forgiveness and then go with him wherever he leads us to serve and witness to others in his name. He really can use you and me in significant ways. Peter and his partners heard the call and went. Let's join them, and go for the cause of the kingdom as well, believing that he can use us. Now it wasn't easy by any means for those guys. They experienced hardships and rejections and even death, but they did not quit. They were on fire for Christ, committed, wanting to see their loved ones, as well as their enemies, rescued, worshipping, enjoying and serving their Jesus. And they were committed to fish until everyone knew about him, and they turned the world upside down for Jesus Christ.

How about you? Have you had this epiphany take place in your life that Jesus can not only save you but use you with all your shortcomings and weaknesses and sin to do amazing things for the Kingdom of God? He really can! Listen to this story. In the year he was elected president, Jimmy Carter was one of three men invited to speak to the 17,000 delegates at the Southern Baptist Convention. Each had a five-minute time limit. The first of these three presenters was the eloquent evangelist Billy Graham. The speaker following Graham was a truck driver. The man was not well educated and seated beside the next U.S. president. The truck driver said that he had never given a speech in his life. Nervously, he confessed, "I don't think I can go through with this. I can't do it." After Billy Graham gave his talk, the truck driver rose to speak and stood silently before the audience, and taking a glass of water handed to him, he mumbled into the microphone. "I was always a drunk and didn't have any friends. The only people I knew were men like me, who hung around the bars in the town where I lived." And then the truck driver went on to describe how someone told him about Jesus Christ and what he could do for his life. And once becoming a Christian, he wanted to tell others about the Lord. Spending time in Bible study with other Christian men prepared

him for witnessing, and since he felt comfortable in barrooms, he decided to talk to people there. The bartender wasn't sympathetic, telling that new convert he was bad for business and being a nuisance. But not discouraged, the truck driver kept on with the mission. And in time, the people at the bar began asking questions. He said, "At first they treated me like a joke, but I kept up with the questions and when I couldn't answer one, I went and got the answer came back with it. Fourteen of my friends have become Christians." Now Jimmy Carter, looking back on this occasion, writes in his book, "That truck driver speech, of course, was the highlight of the convention. I don't believe anyone who was there will forget that five-minute fumbling statement... or remember what I or even Billy Graham had to say."

Friend, Jesus has big plans for you. First, he wants to save you, if you haven't turned to him yet. He's true God, true man; trust in him for your salvation. And then after that, he wants to use you even, the most broken sinner, like me, to bring others into a saving relationship with God. He can use you. So, let's go fishing. I think we should pray about this. Lord Jesus, thank you for coming into this world to save us. Now use us. Help us to spread your gospel everywhere we go. Shine through us. Use us. So ready or not, we want to go fishing with you. Amen.