

## Simon Peter Moves On

Luke 5: 1- 11

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We're in a "job-switching boom." According to the Washington Post, "some 4.3 million people quit or changed jobs this past December."<sup>1</sup>

It's all part of a year-long trend that's been described as the "Great Resignation," which others label as the "Great Discontent." One psychologist noted that many of their patients have been "doing more soul-searching about their jobs than before the coronavirus blew up our lives." Many are wondering how to assess if it's time to move on from their job.<sup>2</sup>

With all that buzzing in my head, I couldn't help but reflect in a new way about Simon Peter in today's text from the Gospel of Luke. He does, after all, feature as the very first disciple who leaves his line of work – "leaves everything," the text says – to follow Jesus. It caused me to spend some time wondering how Simon got to this pivotal moment, and to reflect on what happened after.

I actually went through Luke...and the Book of Acts as well, since they were written by the same author... and noted every place where Simon (slash) Simon Peter (slash) Peter appears. This text, taking place by the sea of Galilee, is actually the second time Simon is mentioned in Luke's gospel. He made a sudden entrance in the previous chapter where Jesus upon leaving the synagogue in Capernaum enters Simon's house and heals Simon's mother-in-law from a high fever.

Then comes today's text. To review: Jesus is preaching to a crowd and asks Simon to take him out a little way from shore in his boat. He is later instructed to take the boat back out to fish, despite not having caught anything all night. He catches so many fish the nets become full to breaking; he calls for some help, both boats get so heavy they even begin to sink. Through this, Simon Peter has a revelation of Jesus, about Jesus, and declares himself not worthy of his presence. Jesus says: Don't be afraid. From now on you will be catching people. And Simon moves on, after bringing his boat to shore, and follows.

From here on in Luke and Acts, Simon Peter does follow Jesus. He sits at Jesus' feet, learning, asking questions, having questions asked of him. One of the most significant moments in Luke's gospel is Jesus asking "Who do you say that I am?" It is Peter, who

Jesus has named “Cephas”, the Rock, who answers: You are the Messiah of God. (Luke 9:18-20)

At the Last Supper, Jesus tells Simon that he will deny Jesus three times. And, we know, in the words from that very chapter that Peter does go on to do this, and goes out afterwards to weep bitter tears. (Luke 22:54-62)

Yet, it is Peter who is the one to run to the tomb when the women tell the disciples that Jesus is not there. And then, as we move to the Book of Acts, the work of the early church, it is there that Peter lives out what Jesus had called him to do and be in today’s text: he becomes a “fisher of people.” It was Peter who preached at Pentecost, when “3000 were baptized.” (Acts 2:14-42). And it is Peter who had the revelation to evangelize the Gentiles (Acts 10 – 11:18), thereby adding believers in numbers so great we could say they were fish that couldn’t be hauled in a boat without the nets beginning to break.

We know that Peter healed a crippled beggar at the temple (Acts 3:1-10), he was persecuted and flogged (Acts 5:17-42), he was arrested and imprisoned by King Herod and was rescued from the prison by an angel of the Lord. The last we read, is that Peter goes down from Judea to Caesarea and stays there (Acts 12:1-19). From this point on, we hear no more and the accounts in Acts shift to the narrative of Paul. It is only from extra-canonical sources (materials not in our Scripture) that we are told of the death of Peter by crucifixion in Rome.

So, as we see, the morning by the seaside was quite a life changer for Simon. I’m astounded by his decision and keep asking myself: How did he choose this path? How do any of us?

It’s an appropriate question to be asking during this time of the church year. (Remember that we started at Advent and Christmas, we are moving through Epiphany and soon will be in Lent.) The texts we read are selections from the lectionary -- there are 3 years or cycles -- and we move through the gospel stories each year pretty much in order, hearing about Jesus’ ministry, his travels, his preaching and healing, all the way through to Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke that are included in the lectionary each share a story about the calling of Jesus’ disciples. We hear one each and every year right about this time. It’s an opportunity, then, for us to evaluate and encounter Jesus afresh as individuals and as a church. We’re invited to ask questions like: Who is Jesus? How does this (new) encounter with Jesus change me? What am I now called to do? What are my gifts? How do I use them to follow faithfully and well?

I'm going to pause a moment here for a short digression. What I'm sharing with you this morning is the way I heard the text. The Spirit opens each of us and has a Word for each of us, and your Word today may not be the one spoken to me. Here's what I'm saying: in today's gospel, Jesus asks Simon to put out your boats into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.

This sounds a lot like working a second shift. Simon and the other fishermen have come in from a long, strenuous, frustrating, exhausting night of intense and dangerous labor. They are, most likely, exhausted. For you, if this is what you are hearing, if this is the part of the text that is speaking to you, please listen to it. I recognize that because of the pandemic, there are too many of us who are overworked, overstressed, are at their limits with what is being asked and demanded of them. Parenting included. So if you are reacting to this text with, "Please, Lord. I just cannot turn my boat around and go out to sea for another exhausting night," then honor that. Respect those feelings and listen to them. We know that Jesus rested. Jesus went away to quiet places away from the crowds. Jesus, too, knew what it was to take a Sabbath. It is a deep human need and should not be ignored or discarded. Please... take a deep breath, and care for yourselves. Maybe that's what you need to hear today. Maybe that's what Jesus is calling you to. Even Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." (Mt 11:28)

In today's text, Simon encountered Jesus this way: he had experienced Jesus' compassion in healing a family member, he listened as Jesus spoke with the crowd, he heard the request Jesus made of him... to set out again into the deep of the sea and let down his nets... and he obeyed. And discovering the miracle of abundance at Jesus' command, he was amazed. He fell down in humility before Jesus. Seeing in him a holy presence, Simon was so overcome he did not feel worthy enough to even be in Jesus' sight.

It was interesting to be part of the discussion of Thursday morning Bible Study this week as they reflected on Rowan William's book, *Being Disciples*. They talked about the chapter on Holiness. To be in the presence of the holy can lead one to feel unworthy, to be so overcome by awe that one feels the need to turn away. One of the lectionary texts for today that we did not read is that of Isaiah, the prophet who, in a vision of God in

the Temple, says: "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 6:5-8).<sup>3</sup>

As the Bible Study discussion continued, the understanding of holiness came to be understood, in Rowan William's words as: "a matter of Jesus going right into the middle of the mess and the suffering of human nature. For him, being holy is being absolutely involved, not being absolutely separated."<sup>4</sup>

"If we take this seriously," Williams continues, "the Christian idea of holiness is to do with going where it's most difficult, in the name of Jesus who went where it was most difficult. He wants us to be holy like that."<sup>5</sup> As the text from Isaiah continued, Isaiah's mouth was touched with a live coal, and the voice of the Lord said: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And Isaiah answered, "Here am I; send me! (Isaiah 6:5-8).

Jesus' response to Simon... falling in shame and humility and awe before him... is to say to him "Don't be afraid." They are not words of judgement or forgiveness. They are words used throughout Scripture following encounters with the holiness, the glory of God revealed. "Don't be afraid." And then, I found this very interesting, Jesus – in Luke's gospel - doesn't say "Follow me." Instead he announces what Simon's new job description entails. "From now on you will be catching people."

Jesus calls Simon into his new career, his new vocation by this pronouncement. Jesus calls people into a life of discipleship – instructing us, by use of our own particular talents and gifts, to care and to serve. For Simon Peter, that role was that of an apostle -- - preaching and witnessing to Jesus as the Messiah, leading others to make that claim for themselves and to discover their own lives and roles in the kingdom of God.

So, who is Jesus for us, to us? How does an encounter with him change us? What are we called to do? What are our gifts? How do we follow faithfully and well?

I want to thank the people who served on our nominating committee here at Catonsville Presbyterian Church. They are charged with the important work of calling (literally calling) members to serve Christ through the ministry of this congregation. They don't do this randomly. Guided by the Spirit, they pray for wisdom and for discernment. They identify those people who have seen the Christ, who know what it is to love Jesus and who desire to serve him. Through their conversations, they invite you – members of the church – to pray and discern for yourselves where it might be that Christ is calling you to use your gifts. Do you have the gift of compassion and care? Perhaps you are being called to be a Deacon. Do you have the gift of leadership, the

ability to shape and nurture the various ministries and committees of the church? Perhaps you are being called to be an Elder. Do you have a love for children and families in the community, and wish to provide for quality care and education for them? Then maybe you are being called to serve on the Child Care Council. Are you gifted with patience and the skill of listening? Then perhaps you are being called to be Stephen Minister. There are many, many opportunities for reaching out into the depth of human need through the life and ministry of this church – through the work of the envision fund, through the nurturing of children and of youth, through peace and justice ministries, dismantling racism initiatives, by caring for refugees, and so much more yet to be discovered. And I know that we do this together because we have seen Jesus and been touched by his love and power and grace, and we want to go out into the world with him as disciples, as friends, as companions, as servants of God.

Every year, dozens of you feel the call of Jesus on your heart through the prompting of the Holy Spirit and you step up to serve. It's good to share those experiences with one another. We begin our New Deacons Orientation with the question: Why did you say yes to this call?

We are always to keep our eyes open for where and how Jesus is meeting us, calling us... perhaps directing us to use gifts that we didn't even know we had. I'm sure that Simon Peter, an "uneducated and ordinary man," as he is described in Acts (4:13) had no idea what was before him when he moved on and left his nets behind.

In our encounters with Jesus, particularly during this season of Epiphany and then onward into Lent, we're invited to see and hear Jesus in ordinary places – everywhere, anyplace, where we live and work and move in our daily lives. It might be in our own places of employment. It may be in our homes or in our schools. Where are you seeing Jesus? How are you hearing the voice of Jesus guide you? Where might your emotions be leading you... God speaking to you through your feelings, and as Ken often reminds us, through our dreams?

For many of us, hearing that call, being given that work, this may not look like quite as drastic a change as Simon's. Not everyone needs to leave their boats behind. It can be a more subtle shift, or redirection. And, it can look like this:

I was reading about Dr. Anthony Fauci who, early in his career in medicine was studying drugs that suppressed the immune system. When it came to his attention that a number of gay men were suffering from a rare pneumonia and other damaged immune system diseases, he made an important decision. He changed the entire direction of his research. He said that he'd been extremely successful in his career and

both mentors and colleagues told him that his decision was crazy. They said, "Why are you throwing away a promising career to go chasing after a disease that's a fluke?" "I decided that I was going to do it anyway," he said. "Unfortunately, it turned out that I was right. It exploded into one of the most extraordinary pandemics in the history of our civilization."<sup>6</sup>

This happened in 1981. That disease was AIDS.

Dr. Fauci went on to describe his passion for his work and for his patients. He truly did enter into human suffering, particularly with people that much of our society despised or dismissed.

He says:

"Homophobia was clearly pervasive at the outbreak of AIDS. Because I was spending most of my time with sick gay men, I would see homophobia in society – and by association as their physician be on the receiving end of homophobic attacks."

In describing his feelings, his motivation, he says:

"I have always felt an empathy towards people who were being treated unfairly, as well as the unfairness of the prejudice against a person whose sexual persuasion is beyond their control. It's just who they are. The injustice of that dominated my attitude about what homophobia was and is. It made me angry to see people have that attitude. It made me a defender of someone's right to be who they are."

(And a note to those who remember the sermon from two weeks ago: Anthony Fauci learned this empathy – from watching his mother.)

I have to say, God bless this man, and the many like him who sacrifice, who risk, who work for those who are suffering, those who need healing and wholeness. They follow Christ...moving on to the work of the kingdom.

Friends, Christ comes to us. Christ summons us. Christ gives us all important work to do for the sake of the realm of God. I pray that we will see, that we will recognize Jesus as he comes to each of us. May we hear his voice, and like Simon Peter, fall down with awe and love and then move on and follow him.

Let us pray:

*Holy One, you are ready to meet us wherever we are in our lives, offering vision, interruption, hope where we least expect it.*

*Surprise us today with some grace unexpected,  
that will change something in us – large or small –  
and send us into the world  
inspired and impassioned to do your work.  
In Jesus' name. Amen.*

(Rev. Susan A. Blair, Interrupted by Love,  
Service Prayers for Epiphany 5, United Church of Christ)

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<sup>1</sup> Eli Rosenberg, 4.3 million Americans left their jobs in December as omicron variant disrupted everything. Washington Post, Feb 1, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/02/01/job-quits-resignations-december-2021/>

<sup>2</sup> Feb. 3, 2022. WP Wellness: Thinking about quitting your job? Ask these six questions first, Jelena Kecmanovic), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wellness/2022/01/20/should-i-quit-my-job/>

<sup>3</sup> Rowan Williams, Being Disciples, 2016, Eerdmans Publishing

<sup>4</sup> Williams, p 49

<sup>5</sup> Williams, p 50

<sup>6</sup> National Geographic Magazine, October, 2021, One on One with Dr. Fauci: Expect the Unexpected, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/one-on-one-with-dr-fauci-expect-the-unexpected>