



THE CENTRAL PULPIT
CENTRAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH | ATLANTA, GEORGIA

DEEP WATER

Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11

February 7, 2010, The Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Caroline M. Kelly

Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

And I said: "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!" Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

Luke 5:1-11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He

got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Water plays a powerful role in the story of our relationship with God. It appears throughout the biblical narrative, from the creation story to the flood story and later in the story of the Exodus from Egypt. Water is a critical element in the story of John the Baptist, in Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, and in the resurrection appearance of Jesus on the beach.

References to water almost always signify a critical turning point in the narrative. So as we read today's story, the mention of water signals to us that something significant is about to take place.

As the story opens, Jesus is standing on the shore of the lake of Gennesaret. As he begins to be surrounded by crowds of people who have come to hear him teach, Jesus climbs into one of two empty fishing boats docked at the edge of the lake and asks the boat's owner to put the boat out, just off the shore. Safely beyond the reach of the crowds, Jesus begins teaching.

When he finishes teaching for the day, Jesus decides it's time to go fishing. The fisherman had been cleaning their nets when Jesus climbed into the boat, and they are tired and disappointed after a long night of fishing with nothing to show for it.

My Dad was an avid fisherman. He didn't always catch a lot of fish, but he spent many hours at a time standing on the beach, casting in the surf or sitting in his boat in the inter coastal waterway, patiently waiting for a nibble or two. Often he would go alone, early in the morning, so when he returned, he was dirty and tired, ready for a shower and a nap.

It took time to get the boat ready, drive it to the dock, get it in the water and to find the place where all the fish were congregated. It took even longer to get that boat out of the water, back home and cleaned before the whole expedition was over.

So I can imagine what Simon and his partners were feeling, coming up empty after a long night of fishing. But Jesus is undeterred by this and tells him to put the boat out into deep water and let down the nets. Simon's protests seem woefully inadequate to me. I would have had a few more choice words in response. But Simon relents, obediently. "If you say so, I will," he responds.

Jesus tells him to put out into the deep water. They're not going for sardines out there; they're going for the really big ones.

Lake Gennesaret, or the sea of Galilee, as it is more commonly known, is not a quiet fishing hole. It is the largest freshwater lake in Israel. During Jesus' time, it supported a thriving fishing industry. The first century historian Josephus reported that 230 boats regularly worked in the lake.¹ Even today, commercial fishing continues.

"Put out into the deep water," Jesus told Simon. Had they already been out in the deep water that night or had they stayed close to shore? The lake was subject to rough winds and waves, so maybe the fisherman had just been playing it safe that night.

The deep is a scary place. It's where the waves grow tall, the wind blows fiercely, and little boats get tossed about like a cork. The deep is where we do not want to be. The deep is unfamiliar.²

But it's here, in the deep water that Simon comes face to face with the power of God. Called to put out his nets in the deep, "what comes up sends Simon to his knees: net-breaking, boat-sinking abundance."³ The catch is so big, that even split among the two boats, it is heavy enough to sink them both.

In response to this awesome display of power, Simon falls on his knees and tells Jesus to go away from him, for he is a sinful man. He is not worthy to be in the presence of God. In Eugene Peterson's translation, Simon says,

¹ Flavius Josephus quoted in "A biblical tragedy in Galilee" in *The Independent*, August 29, 2008.

² Guy Kent, "Jesus in the Boat", *Lectonary Homiletics.com*, February 2, 2010.

³ Jan Richardson, "Epiphany 5: The Wildest Bounty," *Painted Prayerbook.com*, January 31, 2010.

“Master, leave. I'm a sinner and can't handle this holiness. Leave me to myself.”⁴

In the Old Testament passage for today, Isaiah responds to the holiness of God's presence in similar fashion, with a confession of unworthiness and inadequacy.

“Woe is me,” he cries. “I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips ... yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”⁵

In each story God persists, calling and equipping them for ministry despite their imperfections and frailty. Isaiah answers the call. “Here am I; send me!”⁶ Simon and the other fishermen leave everything and follow Jesus.

Where are the deep waters in our lives? Where are the places that Jesus is calling us to go that are unknown and threatening? The places we don't venture for fear we will feel unworthy or inadequate? The places we don't risk for fear of being exposed or challenged to put aside our own comfort and security?

Would you find yourself in deep water if you reached out to a stranger after worship one Sunday, at the risk of discovering she or he joined the church last month?

Would you find yourself in deep water if you were asked to share your faith statement publicly, like our confirmands or new elders and deacons?

Would you find yourself in deep water if you tried to lead worship with your children at home, at the risk of not knowing quite what to say or do?

Or would you say the Central Night Shelter is located in pretty deep water but you aren't quite ready to wade out there because you have never had a conversation or a meal with someone experiencing homelessness?

Jesus says, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets. Don't be afraid.”

Wading into the deep waters may be scary, but it can also be a place of transformation. In the story of the great flood, the water cleansed and renewed a sinful creation. For Moses and the Israelites, the Red Sea provided their safe passage from slavery in Egypt to the promised land of Canaan. For Jesus, it marked the beginning of his public ministry. And in the story today, it marks the transformation of Simon and the other fisherman into disciples.

⁴ Eugene Peterson, Luke 5:8, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (1993).

⁵ Isaiah 6:5 (NRSV).

⁶ Isaiah 6:8.

In each of these stories, water functions as a powerful symbol of life but also of death. So when Jesus asks us to put out into deep water, there's good reason to be afraid. Before the creation could be restored, the great flood blotted out nearly all life on earth. The Red Sea provided safe passage for the Israelites but drowned the Egyptian army that was chasing them.

When we baptize someone, we recount these stories and give thanks for God's saving use of water. But even in this sacrament of welcome, we acknowledge both the death making and life giving power of water. Literally in some traditions and symbolically in ours, those being baptized wade into the deep waters of baptism. They are submerged in the water to symbolize their death to all that separates us from God. Coming up out of the water, they are raised to new life in Christ.

In the waters of baptism, we are claimed and marked as God's own, in all our frailty and vulnerability and we are called beloved. From the waters of baptism, we are called to live a life transformed by God's unrelenting grace. In those deep waters, something in us has to die to make way for something new: whether it is our fear, our assumptions about other people, or our own sense of unworthiness.

"Put out into the deep water," says Jesus. "Don't be afraid."

Jesus also says, "Come to this table." Come to this table to remember the deep waters in which I waded to give you new life. Come to be fed and strengthened to answer my call.

The risk of going deep is real, but the abundance of life that awaits us, like the catch of fish, is beyond our wildest imagination. Maybe we, too, just need to drop the boats by the waterline and follow Jesus, even if we don't know where it will lead.