

Sermon “From the Familiar into the World”

Kirk of St James

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It was setting day for many in NS and PEI this past week, which leads into many people’s favourite east coast season—lobster season! Coming from a small fishing village setting day was always a significant day. People would turn out in the pre-dawn hours to watch the boats steam out of the wharf. There is always a bit of pride watching the boats line up and sail out into the rising sun. The father of one of my dearest friends is a fisherman, and I remember being at her house for a sleepover. I was in my sleeping bag on the floor, and when I woke up there was a lobster loose in the room crawling toward us, and her father laughing out in the hallway. I think his cackling was what likely woke me up. Lobsters are rather grotesque early in the morning! All this to say fishing is a way of life. Fishing is something with a natural ebb and flow and season. People who work on the water understand its nuances, and know what factors might affect whether or not they get a good catch. That being said, sometimes it is just a bad day, or bad luck and nothing comes up in the traps.

I am always struck by the notion that after the absolutely traumatic and gut wrenching events of Good Friday, and the resurrection appearance of Jesus that the disciples decide to go fishing. Yet how many times, after life altering events do we try to find comfort in the familiar and the predictable? This was a life the disciples understood, and it was the world they knew. In many ways stepping back on board, and turning their bow to the horizon must have felt surreal. These people had dropped their livelihoods and walked away three years ago. They had followed an unknown preacher around the countryside, but they knew he was different. They knew there something here they needed to grasp. Maybe occasionally reports would reach home about people being healed, and food being multiplied, but it would have sounded so otherworldly the people back home might not have even realized how significant it was. Then

all of a sudden the preacher is dead, and the disciples arrive home, and there is no more talk about it.

It makes sense then, that even if the reality is not logical, that they try to find a way forward. Out there on the waves, and in the breeze, and the familiar pitch of their boat they were looking for a moment of peace, something to ground them. If they were not going to go into the world, well, they can still do this. Yet, their plan was a complete failure. Having been out all night, they had not caught a single fish. Can you imagine how frustrating and demoralizing that must have been? First everything goes wrong with Jesus, now they go out to do something they have done hundreds of times before only to fail at that too. It is significant John records that for the fishermen the coming dawn signals that they have nothing to show for all their work through the night, and are preparing to return to shore. However, within the Kingdom of God dawn is signalling something new is on the horizon.

With nets gathered aboard, feeling exhausted, stretching out their backs, and yawning, perhaps even feeling the chill of the night, wanting nothing more than something to eat, and then a long sleep they turn their eyes toward home. The dawn would be rising above the horizon, and what felt like an ending for them is about to become another beginning. Oftentimes that is where God meets us. We have run out of steam, and the tank feels empty, and no hope left, then suddenly out of nowhere a little bit of hope finds its way in. The disciples have forgotten that they are now living in a world where there is no stone in front of the tomb of Jesus. When a stranger tells them to toss their nets over the other side of the boat there is no mention of them hesitating. I often wonder about that—why don't they question it? The water on the starboard side of the boat is the same as the port side, and they do not realize who is speaking to them, so why listen?

Much like Mary in the garden, when the disciples first see Jesus on shore, they do not recognize him. So often when we talk about the disciples, we talk about them as a collective

group. However, little bits of their personalities are revealed to us throughout the gospels. Judas stealing from the common purse, Thomas full of doubt, the beloved disciple always the first to recognize Jesus and respond, and Peter who is going to be impetuous and jump headfirst for better or worse. Today is no different. The disciples cast the nets over the other side of the boat and when they begin hauling them back aboard full to bursting the beloved disciple knows. Once again, the first to recognize Jesus the beloved disciple tells Peter, and Peter jumps overboard. No staying to help the others, no waiting on the deck, just full on over the side and swimming to shore.

Biblical scholar N.T Wright makes an interesting observation about this entire scene, the empty nets, the lost disciples, then the reminder of God's abundance. He says, "Jesus, after all has given his followers a strange and striking commission in chapter 20. They are to work for him. They are to be filled with God's breath, and sent into the world as Jesus had been. But if they try to do it their own way, they will fail. They will toil all night and take nothing. The only way is for them to admit defeat, to listen afresh to Jesus' voice, and to do what he says. Then there is no knowing what they will achieve." This moment is also a reminder that the love and the abundance found in God is not in the past, but that the risen Christ continues to bless and feed us.

As Peter dripping wet, and the other disciples gather on the beach, Jesus has prepared a meal for them, "Come and have breakfast" he invites. After a long night on the water that would be welcome. An interesting thought that arose out the readings this week was the idea that God/Jesus provides. It is easy sometimes, as members of the church and volunteers that we have to do everything. God is passive, and it is up to us to do everything, drive everything, and fill every need. Again N.T Wright comes at this from a different perspective, "Whose hands made the sun rise this morning? Whose breath guided us to think, and pray, and love, and hope?" I know I am guilty of thinking that the only resources are the ones at hand, and I often

come at things from a deficit mind set, but moments like this, remind me of the abundance and fullness of God. As Christians we are called to act in faith, and sometimes that means taking a leap where the landing is not yet clear. Sometimes that means reaching out and trusting that God will help us meet the needs around us. “Stand in your mind’s eye with the disciples in the boat. What projects have you been labouring over, and getting nowhere? Watch for the dawn. Watch for the figure on the shore. Listen for his voice. And then do whatever he tells you.” And if the news of the continued love, grace and fullness of God is not enough, let’s look to Peter for one more note of hope.

Peter who failed and denied Jesus even though he had been warned it would happen. Peter who ran away and whose courage failed. Peter who retreated behind closed doors, and then later out onto a boat. Even in the face of all that, Jesus meets him face to face and trusts him with a brand-new commission. “Here is the secret to all Christian ministry, yours and mine, lay and ordained, full-time or part-time. It’s the secret of everything from being a quiet, back row member of a prayer group to being a platform speaker at huge rallies and conferences. If you are going to do any single solitary thing as a follower and servant of Jesus, this is what it’s built on. Somewhere, deep down, there is a love for Jesus, and though (goodness knows) you’ve let him down enough times, he wants to find that love, to give you a chance to express, to heal the hurts and failures of the past, and give you new work to do...it is grace from start to finish.” We do not go into this world alone, we go encouraged and lifted up by Jesus Christ. We do not do things in our own strength, or merit, we act through the love of God who empowers us. That is the best news!