February 10th – 10:30am

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Cast Your Net

I. The Plight of the Fisherman

When I think about Simon from our passage today, I think about the fishermen I grew up with at the Jersey Shore. In my wee town, there were three main driving points of economy – tourism, commute time to NYC, and the fish industry. You had your hobby fisherman, who would enjoy time fishing on their day off and would be pleased with a catch. But you also had your fishermen who lived and breathed by the sea.

These fishermen worked tirelessly, coming in and out of the inlet into the sea they knew well, but the sea that was also unpredictable: their faces were worn by the salt of the sea splashing on their faces, their bodies used to the crash of waves, and the stress of knowing that when they dropped their nets and their lines into the water – a hard days work might come to nothing. Spouses and children at home, would worry about their fishermen, hoping they would be safe in the sea, because there were times, a few times a year, where the waves took the life of our fishermen. At the inlet in Point Pleasant stands a statue of ‘The Lost Fishermen’ – honouring all those who through the years were lost at sea doing this hard work for both body and mind.

When I think of Simon, I think of these fishermen. I imagine that Simon’s life, though set in a different context, might have not been far off from a modern day experience of the fisherman’s life. This was Simon’s very livelihood – if he did not bring anything back in those nets – how would he feed his family, how would he provide for himself and others, and how stressful it must have been for him to wonder if the net that he tended for and lowered for long stretches of the day – if that would bring him any income. Simon was not part of the royal priesthood, he was not a governmental leader, he was your average man who was seeking to make a living in an honest fashion. He was ordinary, probably – and honestly, smelt a little funky due to the time at the shore, and tired from a long day of a no-catch day. Despite all this, or rather, because of his ordinary and humble way of life, he would be the perfect guy for Jesus to seek out.

II. The ordinary becomes extraordinary

The fishermen are washing their nets at the shore after a no-catch day, and the morale is down. Yet, Jesus comes along as the crowd follows him and asks for hop on Simon’s boat and to set out a bit from shore. If I were Simon, after a hard day, you might have a hard time convincing me to get back out on that boat, but Simon did, perhaps because he was curious about this man. He knew this man was special, he had a special message – but he didn’t know that Jesus was the Messiah.

Yet Simon sets out with Jesus on the boat and Jesus delivers a good word to the people from the boat. We are not told what he shared with the people on the shore – they do not seem to be the crucial part of this story. After Jesus preaches, he looks at Simon, and one can just imagine Simon’s face when Jesus asks him to lower the nets again. You can almost hear, even in the written word, his skepticism. He says, “We’ve worked all night long and caught nothing, yet, if *you say so*, I will let down the nets.” I imagine Simon is exhausted and isn’t expecting much from this encounter.

And then, as his eyes probably became larger, he witnesses his formerly empty net so full of fish that he needs to call in other boats and the weight of the catch nearly drowned both boats. This was Jesus’ method in talking to a fishermen in fishermen’s terms – Simon, watch the miracle and be a part of the miracle in your own language, in our setting, in your own way of being. Simon knows, he knows, that this is completely impossible – he knows the waters well, and he sees Jesus and recognizes him as the Saviour. Simon falls to his knees and tells Jesus to get away from him – he tells Jesus that he is a sinful man. You can sense Simon’s feelings – ‘I’m not worthy, I’ve screwed up, I’m not good enough, I’m not really sure why you picked me – I’m a fallible man, I’m a sinner, why would you choose someone like me to show such grace to?” And Jesus, in that perfect, quiet, gentle, and merciful way looks at Simon and says, “Do not be afraid.”

The exact phrase, “Do not be afraid.” is a command that we hear in the Bible at least 70 times, and then there are variants too that increase that number, like ‘fear not.’ Throughout the Bible, throughout humanity, we are a people who need reassurance, because knowing God, loving God, and being God’s disciple is a fearful call and God often needs to remind his children that it’s going to be okay.

III. The Cost of Discipleship

Following this event, some interesting things happen that need a little further explanation. Jesus tells Simon and his partners that, “from now on they will be catching people.” To be honest, this line always made me a bit uncomfortable, so I had to dig deeper. There are a few reasons Jesus talks about discipleship in this way with the fishermen. For one, he is speaking in fisherman vernacular – he is speaking about discipleship in a language and a tangible way that they can understand. Yet, ‘catching people’ sounds like entrapment, it sounds like sneaky evangelism, it sounds like you’re stuck – when we know Jesus is a Saviour who came to set us free. As it turns out, thankfully, by the time the word comes to our ears in English, there’s some nuance that has been lost. The Greek translates this portion of the text in a way that talks about ‘catching people alive’ – that the net holds a far different purpose than it does for the fish. The net is a metaphor, that doesn’t trap people, but rather gently moves people from the deep waters of the unknown to a shore of safety.

Another aspect of the text that I find fascinating is that the fishermen get to the shore with all these fish – tons, tons of fish – that would probably serve to feed them and to support them for at least a year, if not more. They can relax, yet instead of saying, “Thank you Jesus, we really appreciate you doing this amazing and saving act for us, and we will stay here and enjoy our catch” – they leave everything behind.

It’s hard to envision, but it’s true – there’s the nets left on the shore, filled with fish, and the fisherman walking away and following Jesus. Everything these fishermen knew, the life they knew, the livelihood they understood and lived by, changed in one transformational experience in that day. It caused them to drop everything they knew and were comfortable with, to follow the Saviour that would provide them all they would ever need.

IV. Cast The Net

As we reflect upon this passage, of this truly unexplainable and transformational miracle, it leads me to ask two questions of ourselves as we live out our faith:

The first – if Jesus asked you to cast the net, or to do something that you thought was improbable, almost impossible, but you felt that call – would you do it? Would you cast that net, would you see what comes? Would you be fearful, would you do it anyway? Some days I can say an honest ‘yes’ to the question, but other days of faith, I’m not so sure. Yet, that is our journey, that is the call of discipleship – are you willing to take the first risk in casting the net and doing something completely out of your comfort zone?

The second – and perhaps the more difficult question is, are you willing to leave the catch behind? Jesus never tells the fishermen that they must follow him, they have a choice whether to stay on the boat or to follow. We also have that choice – no one is forcing you to be a disciple, but rather, that call comes from God alone and is decided within the heart rather than the mind. Are you willing to leave your comforts behind and to live a life of faith where your first and foremost call is to follow Jesus?

We may not be fishermen, but we are a people called to see the ordinary become extraordinary, to do the uncomfortable, and to live a life that follows Jesus. Will you come and follow Him? Amen.