

Holy Textures

Understanding the Bible in its own time and in ours

Luke 5:1-11

Short, easy to use, thought provoking background commentary for your sermon, bible study lesson, or scripture reflection.

Listed on The Text This Week, www.textweek.com.

Year C, Season of Epiphany

Fifth Sunday After Epiphany

Sunday Between February 4 to February 10 Inclusive

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

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We sometimes think that one of the first things Jesus did was call the disciples. But as we read in Luke 4:14 Jesus begins to teach in the synagogues of Galilee before returning to Nazareth and the confrontation that happens which we have read about the previous two weeks: [Luke 4:14-21](#) and [Luke 4:21-30](#).

Following this event, the Lectionary skips over the rest of Chapter 4 in which Jesus travels to Capernaum where once again he teaches on the Sabbath, amazes everyone, and drives out a demon. (Luke 4:31-37) He then goes to Simon's house and heals his mother. (Luke 4:32-39) Crowds then come for healing. (Luke 4:40-41) And when they try to make him stay, Jesus says, "I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also." And then Luke concludes, "So he continued proclaiming the message in the synagogues of Judea." (Luke 4:42-44)

So unless Luke has once again demonstrated his unfamiliarity with the geography of Israel, Jesus has left Galilee in the north and gone to Judea in the south.

So the opening of Chapter 5 is a bit of leap in both space and time: "Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret ..." (Luke 5:1) In the previous verse, Luke 4:44, Jesus was in Judea, and now we come upon him happening to stand beside a lake back in Galilee. (And the lake here called Gennesaret is more commonly called Lake Galilee.)

Verse 1. For the third time in a few short paragraphs, Luke reports that crowds are pressing Jesus - in this case to hear the word of God.

Verse 2. Since there were no means to keep fish fresh, fishing was done at night; sold in the morning; and eaten that day. So Jesus sees two boats that have been emptied of the night's catch and gear, and the fishers are off cleaning up. And as Malina comments (page 245, see footnote below):

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Being away from home and family at night contributed to the low honor status of fishermen.

Malina also comments (page 363) that the reference in Luke 5:7 and 5:10 to James and John as "partners" of Simon, suggests that they operated under a lease from a tax collector. The tax could be as much as 40% of the catch. Remaining fish were sold through agents who "siphoned off the majority of the profits" and increased the price so that only elites could afford to eat fish.

Verse 3. Recall that Jesus has already been at Simon's house. (Luke 4:38-39)

Verses 4 to 7. As near as I can recall, this is the one and only time that Jesus initiates a miracle - all other times, miracles happen in response to others' requests. In this case, the miracle is not simply that fish are caught, the miracle is the abundance - enough to almost sink two boats.

The abundance of fish is sign that not only can Jesus teach the word of God, he is a Holy Man who also has authority over the spirit of the water and the fish within the water. (This will be demonstrated again when Jesus rebukes a storm. (Luke 8:22-25))

We should also remember that this is the last time that Simon, James, and John will fish in the old way. Jesus is about to ask them to re-imagine what it means for them to be fishers - and to re-imagine who "fish" might be. So the moral of this story is **NOT**, "Let's keep doing what we have always done before and trust that one day God will fill our nets." If anything, the moral is, "Let's stop fishing the way we have always done it. Let's re-imagine who we are and how we are and what we are called to do now. Let's be fish out of water!"

Verses 8 to the first part of 10. Jesus' demonstration of his holiness provokes the appropriate response from Simon Peter: (1) he falls on his knees - which was the customary gesture of honour shown to a superior; and (2) he asks Jesus to leave Simon's unholy personal space and unholy work space (the boat).

However, as always, Jesus is not interested in doing things simply for the purpose of amazing people. Jesus is not in the entertainment industry. He is in the proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God industry. And the time has come to shift from only teaching to crowds who go home, to also teaching to disciples who follow.

Verse 11. Malina comments (pages 245-246):

Note that Luke emphasizes how those following Jesus left "everything." (See also 5:28 and 14:33) More is involved here than leaving material goods behind. Geographic mobility and the consequent break with one's social network (biological family, patrons, friends, neighbors) were considered

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seriously deviant behavior and would have been much more traumatic in (Jesus' time) than simply leaving behind material wealth.

The challenge for those of us hearing this text today is that most of us will in fact not become mobile; will not give up everything. We will, like the crowds in Jesus' own time, go home.

And so perhaps it is helpful to return to the start of the passage, to the crowd who were pressing Jesus to hear the word of God, and lift these folks up as our model.

Yes, we tend to lift up Simon, James and John as the **REAL** models of what **REAL** commitment to Jesus means. But maybe that isn't the only response that Jesus seeks. After all, Jesus does spend considerable time and effort to be with, and teach to, and heal the crowds.

And maybe for those of us with kids and debts and jobs and aging parents simply being amazed and pressing forward to hear the word of God and telling others about Jesus is sufficient. That's what I'm banking on.

David Ewart,
www.davidewart.ca

* [Link to Amazon.com Bibliography for Bruce Malina, et. al.](#), Social Science Commentary on ... The Synoptic Gospels; The Gospel of John; The Book of Acts; The Letters of Paul; The Book of Revelation; and others.