

EPIPHANY 5
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Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 6:1-8
Psalm 138
1 Corinthians 15:1-11
Luke 5:1-11

On pushing off from the shore.

James Hastings Nichols was a mild mannered, gentlemanly Professor at Princeton Theological Seminary. One of his students, an African-American, asked him to preach at his Ordination in a Black congregation. Professor Nichols began the sermon in his normal way: quietly and reflectively. After a few minutes there came a voice from the body of the church, "*Push off from the shore, Preacher!*"

Hemmed in by a large crowd gathered at the shore, hungry for his teaching, Jesus commandeered Simon's boat as a pulpit, and asked him to push off from the shore a little way.

When the crowds were satisfied, Jesus said to Simon: *put out into the deep water and let down your nets*. This was a ridiculous suggestion. Night-time is the time for fishing, not the day. And the previous night's fishing had been futile! Simon says: *Yet if you say so...* At this point in an older translation the word used is *nevertheless*. The other time this word is used by Luke is when Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane: "let this cup pass from me, *nevertheless*, your will be done". All of faith is in this word. Despite all that logic and experience had taught them, *nevertheless* they pushed off from the shore. This time the results were staggering.

Where did the great catch come from? Did Jesus have a new fangled fish finder? The question is unanswerable. More than that, it is unnecessary because the point is theological. In their own strength and knowledge the men from the Gennesaret Fishing Company had accomplished nothing. But when they allowed themselves to be directed by Jesus, the difference was radical, abundant, and awe inspiring. It was a manifestation of the power of God.

There are other stories about Jesus and these chaps in a boat. That time he stilled the storm. This time it is not the wind and the waves that obeyed him, but Simon - and possibly the fish! The great catch revealed for them who Jesus really is, and it was in language they understood. In the face of this Simon experienced deep feelings of unworthiness. He became conscious of the huge disparity between himself and the otherness of God, as present in Jesus. We saw the same in Isaiah, and we know it happened to Paul. But God does not come to condemn us, or to terrify. On the other side of the terror we feel, forgiveness and acceptance is offered. What we see here is that despite our unworthiness, God calls us to a task. The pardon we are offered forms the basis for a new way of life, brought about by this disruptive, compelling grace.

The fishermen had a great catch that day but, paradoxically, what really happened was that Jesus caught them in his net. It is a demonstration of people fishing. For Simon and the others there followed another pushing off from the shore. This time they turned

their backs on it and left to start a new life. Not one based on declining fish stocks, the removal of trade barriers and a drop in the market price, or a catastrophe like impending war. Out of an encounter with divine grace - and forgiveness born of the acceptance Jesus announced in the Synagogue at Nazareth - they learned to overcome their fear and feelings of unworthiness, and went to live in freedom. They changed on the positive basis of something given to them, which they did not seek. It was grace - God with us and among us bringing forth new life - which set them free to go in a new direction.

From now on you will be catching people! When you think about it in fishing fish are pulled out of the water to die. If we took the image literally the mission of the church would be to drag people out of where there are to die! But Luke deliberately uses a Greek word (ῥαβδισαῖος) which refers to catching animals to rescue them; to keep them alive, protected from death. People fishing is a **vocation focussed on life**. It involves capturing people and drawing them into the abundant, eternal life of God that is found in fellowship with Jesus Christ.

As we know, in Christian tradition the fish was taken up as a symbol of Christ, and the boat became a symbol for the Church at mission, sailing the seas of life. The graphic combines this imagery: Jesus is in the boat with the disciples sailing over the deep waters of life, accompanied by the bird, which is the Spirit.

The Great Catch of Fish foretells the future mission of the church, and calls the followers of Jesus to allow themselves to be directed by him. His is the power in which there will be fruit for the Kingdom. This translates into a pattern for us to follow. The challenges Simon, James, John and the others had to face are ours, individually and as a Congregation. We too are called to respond to the grace given us, and to put out into today's version of the deep water and let down our nets, so that others may be drawn in from death to new life. There is no vocation more important than this, and it is for all Christians. It is not just preachers who have to push off from the shore!

We know that people struggle with death in the world. We do ourselves. There are hooks that catch us, nets that we get caught in, traps we fall into and things that get us in their grip. We struggle with depression, obsessions and compulsions, toxic relationships, poisonous habits - and we see the same about us every day. The need for people fishers, who know how to draw others in alive, away from death, is as real now as it was at Gennesaret. But we cannot do this in our own strength. It is God's grace that empowers us for this mission.

How does this happen? In the case of Isaiah, the disciples, and Paul it encountered them in the ordinary pathways of life. Isaiah was serving in the Temple. Paul was out on the job, persecuting Christians. Simon, James and John were mending their nets. All were empowered to leave self behind and start a new life. Martin Luther encountered grace when he was working as a biblical teacher and was trying to solve a puzzle in the writings of Paul. It changed his life and he became a Reformer of the church. It came to a rich man who received an inheritance, and created from it a house to house the homeless. For us it might be that we have had a turn around in our health, and see life in a new way. Maybe we find the partner we long for and a new door opens. Maybe something long desired is finally given to us, and we accept a call to new life. Grace is not something we invent. It is an expression of God's passion for us to have life. We too can live in freedom, and become part of God's passion for calling

others to do the same. But that might also mean that we too will have to be prepared to push off from the shore. And it may also mean we will have to venture where the water is deep.