

Luke 5:1-11 (NRSV)

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God,² he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets.³ 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.⁴ When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."⁵ Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."⁶ When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break.⁷ 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.⁸ But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"⁹ For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken;¹⁰ 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."¹¹ When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Acts 2:1-8 (NRSV)

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem.⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?"⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?

The power of God's Spirit enables ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

Or perhaps, God makes the extraordinary ordinary.

Ordinary people. Plain, everyday folks. Fishermen by trade, there was nothing unique or extraordinary about Simon or about the brothers Zebedee, James and John. One ordinary day, as they worked near the shoreline, a man approached them. As the three washed their fishing nets, this man walked right up and sat down in Simon's boat and asked Simon to take him offshore a bit. They knew this man. He was Jesus from Nazareth.

Jesus had come to Capernaum not long before. He had taught in the synagogue with great power and chased demons out of a man. Jesus had even come to Simon's house and commanded a fever to leave Simon's mother. To the wide-eyed astonishment of all, this very sick woman had gotten up instantly. She made a meal for everyone. How could anyone know what to make of these things?

And now this same Jesus had returned and was sitting in the boat waiting to put out from shore. Simon shook his head and did as Jesus told him. What choice did he have? What choice did he want?

When they got out a short distance, Jesus stood up, keeping his balance in the gently rocking boat, and spoke to the crowds gathered on the shore. When Jesus finished, he told Simon to take him out to the deeper water. The brothers followed in the second boat.

Again, they stopped. The three fisherman were tired and discouraged; they had caught nothing all night. But Jesus told them to drop their nets into the water and again they obeyed. They pulled up fish, masses and mounds of fish, so heavy the nets threatened to break.

This latest encounter with Jesus of Nazareth drove Simon to his knees. He didn't really know who Jesus was, but Simon sensed he wasn't worthy to be in Jesus' presence.

But Jesus just looked at Simon with an intense calmness and told him that from now he would be catching people, not fish. . . . And again, Simon obeyed.

Pentecost

In the Jewish calendar, Pentecost, customarily called the Feast of Weeks, was the second of three major Jewish festivals, held between Passover (in early spring) and Tabernacles (in the fall). For the Jews, Pentecost was an agricultural festival, during which the community would show gratitude to God for the first fruits from that year's crop, i.e., the early harvest.

Jesus was crucified during Passover in the spring. After his resurrection, Jesus spent about six weeks with various groups of disciples, teaching them and preparing them for his return to the Father. Jesus promised that after his departure, God would send the Holy Spirit to be their comforter and advocate. Jesus' disciples were to wait in Jerusalem for the arrival of the Spirit.

The Festival of Weeks, Pentecost, came soon after Jesus' departure. Because Pentecost was such a major festival, Jerusalem was stuffed with Jews from all over the Roman empire. In Acts 2, Luke tells us that the disciples were gathered together on the day of Pentecost in a room near the temple, when there was a sudden sound "like the rush of a mighty wind" and tongues of fire leapt from disciple to disciple. The crowds were astonished at this, each person hearing in his or her own language the disciples' proclamations of God's great deeds.

This outpouring of God's Spirit marked the beginning of a new age. The disciples were new creations in God's kingdom and the Holy Spirit would forever be God's empowering presence in their lives. Indeed, the rest of Acts tells the story of how the Holy Spirit guided and directed the growth and development of the early church. Though we refer to Luke's book as the Acts of the Apostles, it really ought to be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. And God's Spirit is today, for each us, God present with us, empowering us all to do God's work.

The power of the ordinary

Simon Peter, of course, stayed with Jesus for his entire public ministry. They caught a lot of people. And, yet, this Simon was still just a man, even an ordinary man, who, fearing for himself, denied Jesus three times just hours before his crucifixion. But even in this, God would not abandon this man, but instead empowered Simon Peter on Pentecost and after to continue catching people, preaching the Good News with great boldness and building the Lord's church.

Too often, we fail to see the world as it is. Jesus *is* Lord. The kingdom of God *has* arrived already, though not yet in all its fullness. And we fail to see things as they really are, we confine ourselves to life as much of the world wants us to see it – short, tenuous, often wretched, something to be clung to in desperation.

But our lives are given us by God and we will outlive them; death will not hold us. By the power of God, the extraordinary becomes the ordinary. Resurrection not for one, but for all. God's kingdom both a present and a future reality.

When Jesus fed the poor, healed the sick, made the blind see and the rest, he was showing people that God's kingdom had arrived, for in God's kingdom there is no hunger and no sickness and no blindness. Again, these were not merely live-action parables. It was more like Jesus was opening a portal¹ into the kingdom of God when he cured each sick person.

The reality of God's kingdom and its arrival 2,000 years ago is what makes Christian mission work different than it appears to some. Whether it is feeding the hungry, providing malaria nets, or proclaiming the Good News, all these are also enactments of God's kingdom, portals into a world without hunger, malaria, or ignorance.

¹The kingdom of God is not merely a conception of our heads or hearts. It is real; every bit as real as the pavement you and I walk on each day. The best way to think about God's kingdom is as a parallel reality that will one day fully wash over our own. The coming of the kingdom is not about our going somewhere, it is about that somewhere being fully here. One of the things I like about the Harry Potter series is that it opens its readers to the possibility of two parallel realities, the world of wizards and the world of muggles, which somehow coexist in the same "space;" one world fully aware of the other, while one lives in near ignorance.

A full belly may look like no more than a full belly to some – but there is far more going on. It is a bit like seeing a Bible sitting on a table. For many, the Bible is no more than a marginally interesting collection of ancient writings. But, in truth, the Bible is much more than that. It is the “God-breathed” revelation of God’s self. It is the God-given testimony to Jesus Christ, the living Word of God. As the cliché goes, there is more to the Bible than meets the eye. And there is more to each act of compassion.

In the kingdom of God, ordinary people are called to extraordinary work and empowered by the Spirit of Christ to get that work done. Each time we put the interests of others ahead of our own, each time we help those who need, each time we set aside our prideful ambition, we are building for the kingdom of God. Jesus took his disciples from complete novices when he first called to them at the seaside to teachers and leaders in their own right, able with the help of God’s Holy Spirit to build a church that endures to this day. By the power of the Holy Spirit, ordinary people did extraordinary things . . . making the extraordinary into the ordinary!

Yes, each of us begins as a novice, or as Peter puts it, a newborn infant feeding on the pure, spiritual milk, so that we might grow into salvation (1 Peter 2:2). We must learn to be trustworthy apprentices, eager for, as Paul puts it this time, “solid food,” (1 Corinthians 3:2). We strive to be maturing and ever-growing disciples of Jesus Christ.

But of course, God doesn’t stop with us there. We are to be disciples with a purpose, modeling Christ with our heart, hands, head, and habits. In this sense, we are all missionaries. It is this outward focus that is so easy for us to forget. It is not just about helping out or doing good for others. It is about proclaiming the Good News in all that we say and do. Freeing the oppressed, healing the sick, feeding the poor . . . this is not just Jesus’ work, it is our work too. And every moment spent doing such work is a moment lived in the kingdom of God. This is how we Out Live Our Lives.

What is the church’s mission?

What exactly is the church’s mission in this world? Preaching the word? Making disciples? Feeding the poor? Regrettably, Christians have too often seen these as competing choices. But a better understanding of what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God would go a long way to leading us out of this particular trap. In a recent interview in *Christianity Today*, Bishop N. T. Wright was asked about this:

“For generations the church has been polarized between those who see the main task being the saving of souls for heaven and the nurturing of those souls through the valley of this dark world, on the one hand, and on the other hand those who see the task of improving the lot of human beings and the world, rescuing the poor from their misery.

The longer that I’ve gone on as a New Testament scholar and wrestled with what the early Christians were actually talking about, the more it’s been borne in on me that that distinction is one that we modern Westerners bring to the text rather than finding in the text. Because the great emphasis in the New Testament is that the gospel is not how to escape the world; the gospel is that the crucified and risen Jesus is the Lord of the world. And that his death and Resurrection transform the world, and that transformation can happen to you. You, in turn, can be part of the transforming work. That draws together what we traditionally called evangelism, bringing people to the point where they come to know God in Christ for themselves, with working for God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. That has always been at the heart of the Lord’s Prayer, and how we’ve managed for years to say the Lord’s Prayer without realizing that Jesus really meant it is very curious. Our Western culture since the 18th century has made a virtue of separating out religion from real life, or faith from politics. When I lecture about this, people will pop up and say, ‘Surely Jesus said my kingdom is not of this world.’ And the answer is no, what Jesus said in John 18 is, “My kingdom is not from this world.” That’s *ek tou kosmoutoutou*. It’s quite clear in the text that Jesus’ kingdom doesn’t start with this world. It isn’t a worldly kingdom, but it is for this world. It’s from somewhere else, but it’s for this world.

The key to mission is always worship. You can only be reflecting the love of God into the world if you are worshiping the true God who creates the world out of overflowing self-giving love. The more you look at that God and celebrate that love, the more you have to be reflecting that overflowing self-giving love into the world.”

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The following questions for discussion and reflection are from the Fellowship Group curriculum for the current series, prepared by St. Andrew's preaching pastors.

1. On Simon, James, and John:
 - a. What did Simon, James, and John give up by following Jesus?
 - b. What did they gain?
 - c. Knowing that putting down their nets and following Jesus led them to the cross, Easter, and then the early days of the church, how was their life different after it was interrupted by Jesus?
2. How often have we been working so hard and getting nothing? Is that a time when Jesus can interrupt our lives?
3. Before Simon put down his nets, he was afraid that he was too sinful to follow Jesus. How has God forgiven your sins to free you to follow him?
4. Jesus sometimes calls us to go outside of our comfort zone. While following Jesus, Simon, James, and John ate with sinners and went places they never thought they would go. If Jesus were to interrupt your daily routine, what would he call you to do?

Memory Verse of the Week

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it."

Luke 9:23-24

Here, Jesus is preparing his disciples for what lies ahead. They are to put Christ first, irrespective of the inevitable cost. This is Jesus' challenge to us also. The ever-present question for comfortable, affluent Christians is this: What is the cost to me of following Jesus? If our answer is "none," then we have yet to grasp the nature of discipleship.

Scott's 11:00 Class in Festival Hall

A new series begins this week, April 3: *Who Will Be Saved?*

When a prominent Christian preacher shows up on Good Morning America twice in the same week, you know something is up. Such is the case with Rob Bell, a young and influential preacher in America's Christian landscape. The founding pastor of Mars Hill church in Michigan, Bell's new book, *Love Wins*, is drawing charges of heresy from some critics. We'll use the arguments over whether Bell is a universalist (all will be saved) to survey and discuss the history of answers to the question: Who will be saved?

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

In God's Time: The Bible and the Future

We meet at 11:45 in room 127 every Tuesday. This week we continue our discussion of Revelation. Join us whenever you can. Bring a study Bible.

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Offering Christ: a study in the book of Acts

Scott's Monday evening class, beginning April 4, 6:45 in Piro Hall

Luke set out to write an "orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us . . . so that you may know the truth." His work encompasses two NT books: the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. In the book of Acts, Luke tells the story of Christianity in the first decades after Jesus' resurrection. What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? What constitutes a life of discipleship? How should the work of Jesus' followers move forward? What is their message? How did Jesus' followers grow from a small group of persecuted followers to a movement that spread across the Roman Empire? In this seven-week class, we'll see this tense story of God's work to bring about a new world, through the work of a renewed people empowered by God's Holy Spirit.

To register go to: http://www.standrewumc.org/ministries/learning/bible_academy/