

CALLED TO GO FISHING: An Epiphany Season Sermon by Dan Stern, Broadview UCC
Isaiah 9:1-2; Matthew 4:12-23

"There will be no gloom for those who were in anguish." –Isaiah 9:1

"Immediately they left their nets and followed him." –Matthew 4:20

This past Christmas, my three siblings and I converted some of my dad's old slides so we could all see what we looked like at different stages of childhood. The two photos I brought today are of me at more or less the same age as the first two times I ever went fishing. My whole life story so far only has about four 'fishing' episodes to it; and some of you will have heard me tell of these before; so thanks in advance for indulging me. The first time I ever went fishing, if I'm remembering it right, was the summer before I entered fourth grade. My name was 'Danny' then because my dad's name was Dan, and one summer Sunday afternoon, I just followed my dad out onto a big rock amid cattails along the edges of my grandmother's pond. We hardly spoke a word; we just sat down, baited our lines, and tossed them out over placid waters. Before too long, dad caught one. I watched him reel it in. I thought, "I can do that, I wanna' do that" but I didn't catch anything that day.

Next time: seventh grade, better luck. I was way up in the high country Pasatan Wilderness at the time, on a backpacking trek with my two brothers, toward the end of the day, getting hungry. Beside one of the well-stocked, crystal clear, glacier fed upper Cathedral Lakes where rainbow trout were prolifically leaping every which way, we simply attached fishing line, hook and bait to found sticks, and managed in no time at all to catch more than we could eat.

Third time: off Washington's Pacific Coast at Wallport, trolling for salmon on the open sea with college buddies. At one point, a large fish of some kind tugged mightily on my line before somehow breaking free. But that expedition turned out to be less a real fishing trip and more, an initiation in the not-so-smart but widespread college practice of drinking too much beer.

Fourth time: off the Pacific Coast of Mexico at Puerto Angel. I woke up early to ask some local fishermen if I could ride out into the bay with them on their boat while they fished. They were trolling for *huachinango*, or red snapper. As the day warmed up, and with their smiles of encouragement, I jumped out of the boat for a swim. Their smiles soon faded, and I heard a word in Spanish I didn't know: *tiburón*. I had to look it up later: *tiburón* means *shark*. I'm thankful all my limbs are still intact!

Fishing can, of course, be a relaxing, contemplative escape from routine. It can be a rather exciting adventure too. Small-scale commercial fishing is considered to be the most dangerous of all professions. Far from a sure bet means of earning a living nowadays too, since fish of the oceans have been so over-harvested, and lake fish poisoned by mercury and other contaminants. Fishing is no longer something one can easily rely on or go back to, like the early disciples did for a time, after the following Jesus part of their lives really started to get dangerous.

Still, were I to put up a sign on my office door saying 'Gone Fishing', everyone would get the drift. Taking the occasional relaxing, contemplative break from routine is a very necessary and important counter balance, not only to the tension and dullness of constant work and no play, but a necessary and important counterbalance to perpetual works righteousness too, to thinking we are so dang important that we have to always be doing important things. We aren't and we don't! Even Jesus took many a break along his way to Jerusalem, he withdrew, he got away to the far side of the lake, away from the crowds,

away from the aching needs, away from paraplegics and prostitutes and pain, away, even from his intimate circle of disciples also just to pray, to regain his composure. ...Even Jesus would, from time to time, have put that 'gone fishing' sign up on his office door.

Of course, both fishing and being called have to do with more than R and R. In the fuller Gospel context, fishing is no mere sideline excursion, nor any excuse for sloth. For Simon, Andrew, James, and John, fishing was no break from routine, it was the routine! And leaving their nets to follow Jesus, to fish for human beings: that was the truly grand adventure of their lives!

"An adventure, by its nature, is a thing that comes to us," says GK Chesterton. "It is (something or someone) that chooses us, not a thing that we choose." An adventure disturbs our routine, even breaks up the whole world we've known up 'til then. And I wonder: are you still getting called to follow Jesus to a fresh new place of adventure that rocks and reshapes your world that much? I hope so. Annie Dillard once said we should be required to wear crash helmets to church, because we never know when we might get blasted away here with the world-shattering glory of God, calling out to us. At the very least, when we follow Jesus, we are venturing out beyond a safe and protected place. If we can't leave our safety nets behind, following Jesus to dangerously soulful places of costly grace, then our souls remain tethered to something other than the love of God," (M Ralls) something far less interesting. So Simon, Andrew, James and John, without giving it a second thought, immediately left their nets and everything, and I, for one, gotta hand it to them.

Now granted, it is possible that these guys were like, naïve bored, easily influenced farm boys who, seeking fun and adventure, were ready without thinking to sign up for a stint in the army. And though I cringe at this particular metaphor, and would not be at all inclined to want to compare Jesus to a military recruiter, let's face it, Simon, Andrew, James, and John were pretty quick to buy what was written up in the glossy brochure. The gospel keeps saying that they did everything immediately. I mean, what's up with that? On the other hand, you may have noticed that the minor character in the story, father Zebbedee, did not leave his nets and follow Jesus, at least not immediately like his sons. And frankly, for better or for worse, some of us are more like Zebbedee. Less impulsive, more 'practical.' "We're not always ready for high adventure. We'd rather just mull things over a bit more." (Mark Ralls) But those eager, bumbling disciples, got at least part of it right. Following Jesus to fish for people is to take on the most exciting adventure of all.

Such fishing can also get dangerous. During the Vietnam era, when my younger brother refused to register for the draft, he briefly landed in jail, and a major trial ensued in Federal Court at Spokane, the first of it's kind in that part of the state. It was both an intense and inspiring time. It changed us all. And throughout it all, we took comfort in Jesus' example, this One we call Sovereign who was so courageous, so willing to stand before authorities, so willing to not run away, but rather, to confront violence right at its peak, to resist it openly and nonviolently. And though Jesus did, along the way to Jerusalem, take some breaks, he did so in order that he might return to the fray with a calmer spirit, new strength and new resolution. In other words, he heard God's call to go fishing. Not to stay out there on the lake, mind you, but to show by his example that both resting and reentering the fray, both fishing for fish and returning to fish for people, are two pieces of the same call. Any Christian worth his or her salt must, like Jesus, at times in life, take a stand, and have one's life purpose be sorely tested. And because that same Christian inevitably gets tired and discouraged at times he or she has to take time anew to breathe in the Holy Spirit's renewing calm. We are called to go fishing in more ways than one.

Jesus calls all of us to go fishing in various ways when we are young people starting out in our careers. We are called to discipleship, during middle and in older age too. We're called during transition times: at new jobs, at various stages of vocational growth, during periods of unemployment, when starting out in new relationships, when families are expanding, when we face empty nests, retirement, radically changed priorities, and dying with grace. Though it all, as that dove descended on Jesus, it descends on us as well. What I so love about my own call to pastoral ministry is that I get to be in touch with people in all these circumstances and life stages. I find myself in awe every time somebody asks, "How am I to heed the call, now at this stage of my life, on this new day, in this new year? To what am I ready to say yes, and...to say no, to let go of, so there's time and space in my life for what's most fitting now?" I'm amazed every time someone listens and heeds God's call anew.

And since that does keep happening, I plan to give you the opportunity during worship next Sunday, prior to the Annual Congregational Business Meeting, to drop a card in the offering plate with at least one thing written on it that you feel you may be called to do in the year 2008 in relation to God here in this faith community. Because maybe you've been under-appreciated, maybe you have a talent you'd like to contribute that others haven't thought of or asked for. Or...maybe you've been burdened with too many, or the wrong kinds of tasks, and need help finding a better fit here...And when tired or stressed out, let us know that too, and find spiritual solace so together we are able to be a vital, growing, community of faith.

Our individual talents of course, don't accomplish much in isolation. So we need to get better at saying succinctly why we are here as a church in the first place. We can no longer just assume people know what to do to be a well-functioning congregation either, so we're taking steps to simplify our organizational structure, and also to provide more adequate mentoring for new and future lay leader – fishers. We have good reasons to be hopeful here about welcoming and nurturing a whole new generation of purpose-filled fishers of human beings, faithful to the call of Christ.

I challenge you today to keep believing that. Keep believing that the people who so long have set in darkness, who now sit in the region and shadow of death, whether it be on the West Bank or in the Sudan in some of our own homes and work places, and even out on our own church's front porch, where another homeless man took shelter this past week: keep believing that people will find shelter and see great light, and God will guide, and changes will come, and we'll be a part of it, and yet more light will shine, coming forth afresh from God's holy word. And God IS still speaking in the midst of it all, and the end is not yet, the last word is yet to be said. *Tu has venido a la orilla*, you have come down to the lake shore, O Jesus, *tan solo quieres que yo te siga*, you are only asking for me to follow, *en la arena he dejado mi barca*, on the sands I have abandoned my small boat, *junto a ti, buscare otro mar*, now with you I will seek other seas. We're called to go fishing. Don't give up. Amen.