

more light, more truth

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Please note that my sermons are written as an auditory experience. I pay no heed to grammar in the way I lay out the sermon on the page.

Our gospel reading for today is some of the most well-known scripture in all of Christendom. A perennial favorite. A classic evangelism text—fishing for people, following Jesus. A Sunday school staple. I remember at my church growing up -a giant bulletin board hung with a net that was filled with brightly colored construction paper fish. We were each invited to print our name boldly upon a fish and place it in the net. Afterwards, we were each to take a blank fish home as a reminder to bring a friend to church.

It is a simple enough interpretation of this text. Jesus wants us to follow him and as his disciples we are called to fish for more followers. (job number one, is to bring more people to church.)

Imagine my surprise, when studying this scripture with a group of colleagues; I discovered a very different interpretation of this text. In particular, My friend Isaias, a missionary from the Philippines argued that our gospel reading for today has very little to do with evangelism, but rather highlights Jesus' connection to the Old Testament prophets. Jesus' call to "fish for people" is not an invitation to recruit more followers- but rather echoes the admonitions and warnings of the prophets of old—

For example

Jeremiah, a prophet before and during the Babylonian exile, critiques those who abuse their power and privilege. Jeremiah mentions the "hooking of fish" (Jr. 16:16) as the judgment upon those who worship the wrong things: "I'm sending for many fishermen to come and catch this people...I will make them pay double for their sin and wickedness, because they have defiled my land with idols that are as lifeless as corpses."

Another prophet, **Amos** speaks out in a period of relative prosperity in Judah's history, when the urban privileged manipulated credit and debt as a means to extort land and resources from the laborers. He also interprets "fishers of persons" as God's indignation against those who oppress: "The days will come when they will drag you away with hooks; every one of you will be like a fish on a hook. You will be dragged to the nearest break in the wall and thrown out."(Am. 4:2)

The exilic prophet Ezekiel speaks out against foreign oppressors who subjugate God's people. Ezekiel raises his voice precisely against the unfair king of Egypt. "I am going to put a hook through your jaw and make the fish in your river stick fast to you. Then I will

pull you up out of the Nile, with all the fish sticking to you. I will throw you and all those fish into the desert.” (Ez. 29:4)

I wonder what the Sunday school bulletin board would look like for that text.

This is a radically different interpretation of what Jesus is saying when he says to the disciples, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” When Jesus evokes the image of the fish, he is drawing on a prophetic tradition that resonates deeply with the disciples. Hearing Jesus’ message of good news – that God is finally acting to restore his good will to the people—the disciples act with boldness. They leave their nets. And in the case of John and James they leave their own Father. They forsake the small comforts of certainty, economic stability and family in the midst of hardship and Roman dominance.

Read this way- When the disciples venture forth—to be “fishers of people.” ----they align themselves with the prophets and stories deeply rooted in their tradition.

And while Jesus’ ministry is non-violent, it is not non- confrontational.

Jesus and his disciples will reel into the light what once swam beneath the murky surface, confronting the status quo- with a new revelation that God’s kingdom has come near and his Kingdom is for ALL.

It is at this point that I (and perhaps you too) begin to squirm a little. I’m not sure I like where this is going.

I pray God, I’m not one of the fish (although I suspect in some respects, I am) but even more I resist being a prophet.

Being a prophet is contentious and frankly a little un-lady like— and it certainly demands far more of me than inviting a friend to church.

But this interpretation of the fishers of men story is challenging- not just because it calls us to a different kind of discipleship- but because it raises all sorts of questions about the way we interpret scripture itself. These two interpretations of the same passage, the familiar evangelical one, and the disruptive prophetic one --highlight both the beauty and challenge of scripture. Beauty: because new and different interpretations expand my thinking and offer new insight.

Challenge—because I must now struggle to reconcile this new interpretation with the old one? Is one “right” and the other “wrong”? Do I have to renounce my construction paper fish? Or maybe I can right off this more liberationist interpretation as politically motivated. Am I wrong to imagine that discipleship means bringing people to the Lord? In order for a story to be true doesn’t have to mean one thing. And since decades of historical criticism have failed to agree on that one thing—well, how will I (how will we) ever know what the scriptures mean?

When my friend Isaias, first challenged me with this interpretation- he was not afraid of being contentious or un-lady like. You see Isaias served as a Missionary in the Philippines. He has walked the walk with the poor and down trodden- and with them he was an evangelist, bearing the good news of Jesus Christ. But his role has shifted now...to us, (his mostly privileged friends and colleagues,) he is a prophet. He makes visible, the invisible. He exhorts us to consider anew the gospel, and what it might mean to millions across the globe, if we American Christians took it seriously. Coming from his multi-cultural context, Isaias sees the world with a different lens. As his life experience is brought to bare upon the Holy Scriptures, new meaning, more light and more truth breaks forth from God's Word. And because Isaias is willing to engage in conversation and debate-- His story activates God's Word in me in new and unexpected ways. {You see Isaias knows what I am only just beginning to learn, that being a prophet offers not only hope to those who need it most- but is indeed the very best hope for the fish themselves.}

Prior to the reading of the gospel, we sang these words together:

"We limit not the truth of God to our poor reach of mind, to notions of our day and place, crude, partial and confined. No let a new and better hope within our hearts be stirred- the Lord has yet more Light and Truth to break forth from his word."

Throughout Marks' gospel, Jesus will through his life, words and actions reinterpret the stories of the past, the scripture of his time. He will make new connections- referencing the Hebrew scriptures in innovative and startling ways. He will employ old symbols like the fish to inspire bold action. He will ignite the imagination of a people to see beyond the boundaries and expectations of their religious, political, even physiological reality.

We who are Christ's gathered body have been given God's Word as our inheritance. Just as Jesus breathed new life into the symbols and stories of his time, as Christ's gathered body we must do the same. Isaias and I learned about God through our relationship with one another and the bible. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we too must make new connections between God's Word, ourselves, our church, our community and our world.

To be sure we can interpret scripture wrongly; we do it all the time. That's why we don't do it alone, but always in conversation with our brothers and sisters in the unity of the church. Theologians argue, bible scholars study, and preachers preach. The Living Word of God is in conversation with itself- a dialog that transcends both time and place. God's Word is in conversation with our words, our contexts, our prayers and our imaginations. Across time and space we join the crew of this mighty ship of faith.

Together we fish the Scriptures and haul up in our nets a revelation of God's love that is multiplicitus, inexhaustible and deeply, deeply personal.

When our God, infinite and eternal offers us his Word, there can only be an excess of meaning.

[So as our more evangelical friends would say: Get in the Word. Don't worry so much about getting it right. Just get into it. If you're contemplative, contemplate it. If you are an artist, paint it, if you are a talker, talk about it. If you are intellectual, study it, if you are writer, write about it. Pray it, sing it, read it, speak it, dance to it. As you interpret it, allow it to interpret you,--and then share it. Not like someone with all the answers, but with curiosity, humility and wonder.]

So don't be shy- Add your voice to the holiest and longest running conversation of all time and you will see- You will see that There is yet more Light and Truth to break forth not only from God's Word, but from our lives. Perhaps that is something we can all be evangelical about.