

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
Revised Common Lectionary, Year C

February 4th, 2007

Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

The Call of Tomorrow
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When I was very small, Grandpa used to take me fishing on Little Lake, a body of freshwater in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, small as its namesake, sometimes murky and sometimes clear. My grandparents lived at the church conference center, where they looked after it, and Grandpa would hold services in the tiny chapel. It was a rustic place, bitterly cold and snowy in the winter, and cool and comfortable in the summertime.

Outside their house was a little dock. In the garage with the snowshoes they kept a sailboat. But the fishing boat was a simple rowboat – to troll with for Northern Pike – or simply to fish, as a little boy like me was wont to do, with a simple bobber, maybe some salmon eggs or better yet, earthworms from the nearby bait and tackle shop.

One day, Grandpa and I went out fishing. The weather wasn't all that good. It was damp, and cold. Grandpa produced an old jar of salmon eggs, although I was always a bit dubious about the sickly Pepto-bismol color of the eggs themselves. Apparently the fish were, too. We sat for a few hours out on the smooth lake in the damp cold, watching the bobbers sit in the water doing nothing. Not a nibble. Not a fish in sight. Not a fish in the whole lake, it seemed.

Grandpa was philosophical about many things, fishing included. Seeing my disappointment as he rowed back to shore with me all bundled up a shivering in my windbreaker, he chuckled and said in a way only Grandpa could, "Well, Richard. . .tomorrow's another day."

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When Jesus shows up on the shores of Lake Genneserat in today's Gospel along with the madding crowds, Simon, James, and John are up to their usual business: fishing and having no luck. Jesus commandeers one of the boats, directing Simon Peter to push off from the shore so this itinerate teacher may speak better to the crowds gathered at the water's edge.

It must have seemed a different thing to do after a night of bad luck. Fishing is never a predictable enterprise, and most who rely on it for livelihood, probably like Simon, James, and John, live always on the edge. What Jesus brought, at least, was a bit of break in the routine. Besides, it was the done thing to welcome such a Rabbi, who might teach them something new about the God of Israel.

A respite, perhaps, for a spiritual teaching, in the midst of work.

Imagine Simon Peter's surprise when Jesus asks him to do what he knows so well – put out into the deep water again and lower the nets. But they had been fishing all night, Peter argues, why would this time be any different?

Like Peter in his boat, and like the reluctant prophet in today's reading from Isaiah, we are prone to hesitate when God in Christ pays us a visit and demands something of us. We know our own lives too well, which is at times both comforting and frustrating. Comforting because our lives and work are so familiar. Frustrating because the downsides of who we are and the challenges of our lives haunt us, sometimes doggedly so. But to break with both can be frightening.

We all know people locked into patterns of life that we would love to see them break free of. We all know in ourselves patterns that we wish we could be rid of. It's February, a month into the New Year. Just how are those resolutions going for you? You see what I mean?

Christ knows this about us, the children of God that we are. We are like Simon Peter. We are like the reluctant prophet. Christ comes into our midst and demands that we try again, even when it seems silly and a waste of effort. Calls, we are learning in today's Gospel, generally do not come like a lightning bolt out of the blue (although they might, at times). More often, they appear in the ordinary routine, when we lower our nets again and they come up, much to our surprise, full, heavy, and splitting. When suddenly God breaks through the mundane into our work, into our closest relationships, into the parts of our lives we know best. And like a cascade, the call sends out ripples that transform us utterly.

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Grandpa went out the next day to buy some earthworms. And there we were, headed out back on the lake in better weather, with real bait for *real* fish, it seemed. And like a miracle, we could barely keep the hooks in the water for a few seconds before reeling in a catch. Within an hour or so, we had over twenty fish – more than my small imagination had ever thought possible – enough for a feast that night, and enough to bring deep joy to a little boy's heart where before he had felt empty at catching nothing.

It was my first lesson in fishing. And my first lesson in Grandpa's saying, "Tomorrow's another day."

When Christ shows up on the scene, "tomorrow" becomes "today." Get ready for surprises. Get ready to find your heart's desire, even if it's something you never *knew* you wanted. For Jesus' first disciples, it was being shocked at hauling in a dangerously large catch. Enough that it threatens to sink the boat. And like us, Simon Peter suddenly feels profoundly vulnerable before a God who can turn situations, communities, and even the very heart of our lives around in an instant. Our old routines are suddenly broken open into abundant life. We leave them behind for something much deeper, more profound, and more joyous. We are reinvented, not by our own mettle, but by a graceful moment that we simply cannot forget – like, for me, a day in a rowboat on Little Lake so many years ago.

And then we are called to fish for people – to draw others into this strange and wonderful life of broken bread and a shared cup. . .a life of prayer and surprise in grace. . .a life of turning away from all our certainties about how our lives work and who God is. Of stepping into the beautiful, loving mystery that is Holy with this stranger who is at once our friend – this Christ who transforms our ordinariness and calls us into something more marvelous – a life of joy, being made and made anew again and again, being freed from all that binds and joining the great dance of life that spans eternity itself. Seek that, if you can. But if you can't, take heart in knowing that it is seeking you. . .coming to join you in the boat of your life. . .coming to join us in our shared boat as a community. . .when we least expect it. . .and we will never be the same.

Amen.