

“Fishing with Jesus”
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – January 22, 2023

Please Read:
Isaiah 9:1-4
Matthew 4:12-23

Thom Gillespie, president of *Princeton Theological Seminary* when I was a student, was having lunch with an older national church leader, James Andrews. They were both concerned about the rapid decline of the PCUSA - the mass exodus of thousands of men and women each year. “Jim,” the president asked at one point, “do you see any hope for this old church of ours?” His answer was memorable. “No,” he said flatly. With a twinkle in his eye he added, “*But, then, there’s always Jesus.*”

Our Session met Tuesday night to approve the statistical report to the PCUSA. The bad news is that although we had a good year in many ways, over the past five years, we have lost dozens of families and seen a decline in attendance. We, too, are tempted to be anxious and give up hope on the future of our congregation. “*But, then, there’s always Jesus.*”

Today’s lectionary gospel text recalls the first days of Jesus’ public ministry. He’s just been baptized by John and spent 40 days in the desert being tested about who is really is. The political leaders of the day are cracking down on spiritual leaders. John had been arrested by Herod Antipas. The stakes have been raised for Jesus. What will he do? Matthew writes that he “withdrew to Galilee.”

Is this a retreat? Has Jesus opted for going into hiding? You could argue on the contrary, it was an advance! Herod Antipas was the Tetrarch of Galilee. He didn’t know Jesus yet, but he would be the one who sends him to Pilate. From the very beginning, Jesus discerned and faced the key issues and powers which sought to block his ministry. And there, in Herod’s own land, he proclaimed his agenda: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

President Biden will give his state of the union address on Feb. 7th. Here Jesus gives his state of the Kingdom address: His primary goal is turning people back to God with the promise that God is near. Jesus quickly engages in a clear strategy to realize this goal. Jesus goes into Galilee and calls ordinary people like you and me: “Follow me and I will make you fishers of people.”

But what does being *fishers of people* really mean? Let's first of all clarify what it does not mean... Did you read about Paul Shoro. He is an Ethiopian man who on January 7th was asked by security to leave the *Mall of America* for evangelization in the shopping mall. "Jesus is associated with religion, and it is offending people. People have been offended," the security guard continued.

A spokesman for *Mall of America* said Mr. Shoro was allowed to remain in the Mall following the interaction while still wearing his shirt. I suspect you'll hear more about this, but the point is, I don't think Jesus had in mind getting in peoples' faces about conversion. Turn or burn was not his message. Some people think fishing for people means throwing a net over them, trapping them. I've been shocked at the portrayal of Christianity in the Netflix series *Valhalla*. The Christians are more violent, conniving and evil than the pagans. Evangelization is convert or be killed.

That, of course, is not what Jesus had in mind. I think a little humility is in order, and a lot more respect for the fact that each person is on a journey. I recently read a Pew Research poll that indicates approximately a third of the population in this country attend worship weekly, another third somewhere from once a month to once a year, and then another third never at all. We're talking tens of millions of people. They have no reference to Jesus except absurd portrayals on Netflix or other media, or what? You! Consider... You may be the only Bible your neighbors read...

What if we looked at our neighbors, our colleagues at work not as a project, but as objects of divine love and compassion. As the Psalmist wonders, "In light of the vastness of the universe, why do you care about humans, God?" What if we remembered Jesus summary of the weightier matters of the law: Justice, mercy, and faith (Matt 23:23)? What if we remembered that of the 300,000 years that homo sapiens have existed in this universe which is approximately 13.8 billion years old, the Abrahamic religions have only been around for 1% of the time?

I honestly believe that everyone is on a spiritual journey of some kind, spirituality being defined as how you use your life energy, and it can range from narcissistic individualism and power-mongering to Christ-like compassion and self-giving love. The question is, are we catching people by Viking domination (I think Christian nationalism is a current iteration of this), or are we catching them with the Kingdom culture, the Kingdom reality of the grace, truth and love revealed in Jesus?

I believe God is calling us as a congregation to hear again Jesus' primary call - which is to share the good news of God's forgiveness and love with more people; to welcome, love, teach, and equip them to embrace their true identity as bearers of the image of God and as beloved.

I had the privilege this past week to be a part of a spirituality group of people who are in the process of recovery from addiction. I asked them how they would define spirituality, and almost to a person they all affirmed that community is essential for healthy spirituality, for healing and recovery. I think you know that we are no different. I love Kate Bowler's blessing that includes the phrase, "There is no cure for being human...but for each other, we are all good medicine."

You know the number one reason given by people who don't go to church about why they don't go to church: "Nobody ever invited me." Becoming better fishers of people is just not that difficult.

The great Swiss theologian Karl Barth, said evangelism is often like a man who, walking down the sidewalk, suddenly looks up, begins to point toward the sky, toward the tops of the buildings along the street. What happens? Immediately, a crowd begins to gather. People busily walking down the street stop, stare upward, become curious about what the man is pointing to. Others look, then they point. "See, up there, Look," they say to the gathering crowd.

As Christians we are those who have seen something, namely, the advent of God into our world in the person of Jesus. We have heard something, namely the voice of God calling us over the cacophony of other voices and noise and if asked we share with others what we have seen and heard. I wonder if when we point to Jesus, we can still draw a crowd even here in New Canaan?

When you start to discuss about where Jesus calls you to follow, what does the Kingdom coming near look like for you? For me, it has to include forgiveness, less judgment, more kindness and welcome to the outsiders. The Micah text that we'll talk about next week is key: Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God...

I'm thinking about the tens of thousands of people who are getting laid off from high tech and finance jobs. Some of you have experienced that... I want especially those people going through hard times, struggling with addiction, dealing with prison sentencing, on the verge of divorce, or the more garden-variety wonderings about if

life has any meaning at all? Jesus wants each person to know that God loves them, and that there is a deeper joy of a new life and purpose for living...

Tony Campolo is one of my favourite evangelists. As I had my birthday this past week, I remembered one of my favourite stories about Tony.

Late one night he returned from a trip and stopped at a diner downtown to have a cup of coffee. It was about midnight. Three women came in and sat at a table next to him. They were dressed like prostitutes. Tony didn't want to be rude but couldn't help but hear their conversation. The women talked about what they would do tomorrow. At that point one of them mentioned that it was her birthday tomorrow. Her name was Shirley. They congratulated her, and asked what she was going to do? She said she never celebrated her birthday. She never had a party or even a cake... The conversation ended, they asked for the check, and went back to work.

As Tony was leaving, he asked the waiter at the counter, "Do you know those women who were just in here, especially the one named Shirley?" The man said, "Sure, they come in here every night."

Tony said to the man, this sounds crazy, but could my church throw a surprise birthday party for Shirley tomorrow night? You know, we'll decorate with balloons and streamers, and wear hats and make a cake. A real party for her birthday. We'll clean everything up too... What do you think?" "Well, why not?" the man answered. He wasn't quite sure what to think...

The next morning. Tony called about ten of his church members. He told them the plan, and everyone agreed to help out. Someone baked a cake, another person got decorations for the diner, and they all met at 11:00 at night to decorate. At around midnight, sure enough, the three prostitutes came through the door, and everyone shouted, "SURPRISE: HAPPY BIRTHDAY SHIRLEY!"

Shirley was literally blown back out the door. She could not believe it. Her friends were in shock too but brought her back in and put a hat on her head and laughed as they sang happy birthday. They brought her over to where the cake was, and everyone quieted down. Shirley started to cry and asked. "Who are you people, and why did you do this for me?" Tony said, "We heard it was your birthday, and wanted to let you know how special you are. Why don't you cut the cake and have a piece..." Shirley was too overcome, and finally said, "No, I've never had a cake before. I want to take this

home and keep it.” It was an awkward moment, so Tony said a prayer and Shirley went home with the cake. Everyone helped clean up and left.

As Tony was leaving, the man behind the counter asked him, “Are you a preacher or something?” Tony nodded. “Where is your church?” the man asked. “Cause any church that throws a birthday party for a hooker is my kind of church.” And from then on, that bar tender was in church!

Of course, fishing with Jesus isn’t just fishing with words. We fish with who we are, with how we use 24 hours in a day, with how we spend the money we earn, with how we love our families and friends... and our enemies. We fish with how we think and act as a congregation, in the strange and wonderful situations into which God has called us. How we respond shows whether we are bound by the powers of this world or set free by the gracious power of the One who calls us.

One final note on responding. Did you notice how the first disciples responded? Matthew writes that, “*Immediately* they left their nets and followed him.” It is another sermon topic, but immediate response is something I’d like you to remember. At least it means, “Don’t over think this!” There are certain windows of opportunity, moments when hesitation means elimination. The road of faith will not bring you back to this place and time again. You hear a call, you respond. Not tomorrow. Not next year. Not when it becomes convenient. Not when you know for sure whether this is the “right thing” to do or not. Not when you have all the angles figured out and have minimized all the risk. When you hear God calling, friend, respond. Now. Immediately.

There are a lot of reasons to lose hope in this world on so many levels. And it may not make any sense to anyone else to pursue our call to fish for people... “But, then, there’s always Jesus.”

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.