

# **Come On Down To My Boat**

**Luke 5:1-11**

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At this point in our relationship, after fourteen years, you've probably grown accustomed to some of my style as a preacher. Maybe not y'all, down here in the front, who haven't actually been coming to this room for fourteen years since you're still just 11; and maybe not y'all here on the other side who have been coming here for about that long but have perhaps made a habit out of giving less than your full attention to the preacher. Obviously there may be others in the room who are new or who have made a habit out of tuning out the youth minister when he preaches...but those of you who have been here a while and who—God bless you—are willing to hang onto my every word: you know what to expect. You can expect a few stories from my own life experience, a fairly laid-back demeanor that my preaching class dubbed “conversational,” and a sermon that tries to look at multiple passages of scripture, holding them in tension with each other in a way that hopefully shines light on some critical element of the gospel. Because our church typically uses the lectionary, there are multiple passages—one Old Testament, one New Testament, one Gospel—that are available for examination in any given week, and I get curious about what happens not only when we look at those passages by themselves but also—especially—what happens when we look at them in light of one another. This is what I do. This is my schtick.

Except that, this time around, when I tried to do that, I couldn't get very far. Despite laboring over the scripture for days, I couldn't figure out how to make these three passages connect, even two of the three connect. At first I thought this was just because the passages themselves didn't have much in common...but then I asked myself what each passage was about, individually, and I realized that I had a much bigger problem: the gospel text really seemed to be three separate stories smashed together, each with its own point. I couldn't connect our texts for the morning because I had too much connecting to do with these eleven verses in Luke.

Working backwards, the final of these three stories (really just one verse) is the passage that most preachers focus on when choosing Luke 5:1-11 as a

central text. This is Luke's version of the call of the four fishermen, two sets of brothers who will eventually become the cornerstone of Jesus disciples. Preachers focus on this section because it features a humble Peter—something of a rarity in the gospels—and because it features Jesus being clever by saying “from now on, you will be catching people.” Preachers get a lot of mileage out of that pun, which is interesting given how little of our society these days has made a career out of fishing.

At any rate, the call of Peter and the others is typically the focal point from the pulpit here, which is amazing given the fact that the story which precedes this one is a remarkable miracle story. In this story, the future disciples have been fishing without success all night when Jesus directs them to try once more, in “deep water.” Skeptical but compliant, the fishermen drag in a huge haul, “so many fish that their nets were beginning to break.” It is Jesus' first miracle in Luke that isn't a healing, and it establishes him as a divine power in command of the natural world.

This is a story that should sound familiar, even though it's frequently overlooked in the pulpit, because it's got so much in common with the finale from the gospel of John. There are at least ten commonalities between the two texts, ranging from the disciples fishing all night with no luck to the instructions from Jesus to the successful results to Peter's demonstrative reaction. Maybe this is why preachers choose to focus on words other than these: they know that they can always talk about the miracle of the full nets the next time John comes up in the lectionary.

I, too, didn't really want to focus on this passage...but I also was less interested in the call story that follows it. The verses for today that kept captivating me were the ones at the beginning of the chapter, the story—virtually unconnected from the rest—where Jesus is teaching a crowd of people. The crowd begins to press in on him, so he gets into a boat and takes it out a little ways into the water, then continues to teach.

Maybe it says something about my lifelong exposure to the church, but this is the story that stands out to me, not the story where Jesus helps a group of men catch a bundle of fish or the story where Jesus asks career longshoremen to transition into the unlikely vocation of evangelism. Jesus is always performing tasks that seem beyond my comprehension and asking his supporters to give up what they know and follow him completely. But preaching in a boat? That's unusual.

It's unusual for multiple reasons. First, it's unusual because Jesus tends to stop interacting with the multitude when he's being mobbed. In Mark, when Jesus is traveling to Jairus' house surrounded by a throng of people, he still stops and notices the one woman who reaches out and clutches his garment. He makes time for her, one-on-one, despite a horde of people surrounding him. A similar isolating happens when Jesus feeds the 5000 and when a group of well-intentioned followers try to make him king: he withdraws from the crowd in a boat or to a mountaintop, preferring solitude and prayer to the adulation of the multitude.

But here, he goes out just a little ways, and he continues teaching. I can't help but think that his message must have been incredibly important since he was willing to forgo his usual withdrawal...and yet the author of the gospel never tells us what he taught, simply that he taught. This, too, seems unusual.

Also unusual is the fact that he sits down in the boat. Maybe this is a function of necessity, but it's an odd posture for someone teaching a multitude. Usually when someone has a message he's trying to convey to a large number of people, he stands up, makes himself tall and easily seen, maybe even stands behind an impressive piece of carpentry...but Jesus does the exact opposite of these things. His pedagogy is questionable at best...and yet, no doubt, wildly effective.

All of this unusualness suggests to me that we're not supposed to overlook these three verses, even we don't know what exactly Jesus teaches in them and even though they're followed by the greatest fish story ever told and the call of some of the most important men in the gospel. This story about preaching in a boat...this means something. This is important.

But it's hard to know why this is important because we don't get the slightest clue what Jesus said.

The clue we do get comes in the following stories. In order to understand and appreciate why this brief and peculiar episode is in our scripture, we have to examine the stories that follow and hope that they can shed light on the beginning of the chapter. Reading these verses repeatedly this past week, I found myself asking "what do these three stories have in common?"

What's their connective tissue?" And the answer (other than "Jesus") surprised me.

It's the boat.

The crowd is present in the first story and nature is prevalent in the second. Peter and the others show up in the final two, but they're conspicuously absent in the first. We get a teaching story, a miracle, and a commanding revelation from Jesus; three different means of him communicating to those surrounding him and to us...but the only unifying thing we get in all three of these stories is the boat itself. That's what holds these eleven verses together.

To make sense of this patchwork of stories, then, it seems worthwhile to examine what function or symbolism the boat provides. What makes this boat—this nondescript, easily-overlooked wooden vessel—such a big deal?

In the first story, where Jesus enters the boat and then teaches from it, the boat serves two purposes. First, it provides a buffer for Jesus. He is overwhelmed by the crowd—which is pressing in on him, giving him no room—and he uses the boat to get just a little distance. Space acquired, he then uses the boat the same way we use this pulpit: to captivate. I joked earlier that it didn't make sense for Jesus to sit down and preach from the boat, but the truth is that he's still drawing attention from the crowd by entering the boat and entering the water. The boat is physically bigger than he is. It allows him to draw other passersby into the crowd to hear his message.

The combination of these two purposes is that Jesus uses the boat to shift attention from him as a person to his message. In order for the message to be appreciated, those listening are going to have to give Jesus both space and focus. They must allow him room to breathe and then hang onto the words he exhales. They may not even know this...but Jesus knows it, and he simply and deftly uses the boat to make it happen.

It's worth noting that this is a story wherein Jesus' humanity is heavily accented. Being overwhelmed by a crowd of people is a human trait. Needing to get a little distance to make one's point—that's also a human Jesus. Using the boat to set oneself apart is, again, a human tactic. This is not God the powerful and almighty, king of the cosmos. This is a teacher

working to convey truth to an uncomprehending mass of people. This is Jesus as wholly human.

In the second story, Jesus uses the boat to demonstrate his divinity. The miracle of the full nets does not portray Jesus as healer or as one who triumphs over death. One might argue that it depicts him as “provider,” much like the feeding of the 5000, but the emphasis here isn’t that the disciples go from hungry to full; the emphasis here is that Jesus demonstrates a phenomenal command over the natural world. This is a miracle that accentuates Jesus as wholly divine.

The boat, then, becomes a vessel that represents both the humanity and the divinity of Jesus. In the span of just a few verses, this one unremarkable craft sheds light on these two paradoxical characterizations of Jesus. The boat allows us to see Jesus as both fully human and fully divine, as both teacher and miracle worker, as both one with significant words for us to hear and remarkable deeds to perform in our world.

And the author of Luke isn’t done yet.

We may not really appreciate the fullness of what Jesus is doing here because, unlike Peter and the others, we are not commercial fishermen. Jesus isn’t choosing just any old object to demonstrate his fullness and majesty; he’s choosing the object that best represents the very essence of Peter, James & John. The boat already holds a host of images: it transports, explores, and delivers; it provides recreation and sustenance; it is a source of work and rest; it buoys, speeds, and drifts. The boat is their joy and identity, rich and diverse in its meaning despite being a plain and simple vehicle.

So when Jesus shows up and adds more layers of meaning to the boat, he probably blows their minds. He’s not just revealing something about who he is; he’s messing with their essence. There is a transformative power in his demonstration. Peter and the others are not only shocked at the haul of fish but also flabbergasted because this man has appropriated their identity, their boat, and turned it into something else.

He then begins to leave. And “they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.”

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I may be over-reading this passage. I was an English major in college, and I have a tendency to find symbolism where it was never intended. But I do think the boat is a fascinating and critical player in this story, in these three stories, a player with a message that we can learn from. It conveys the power, mystery, approachability, and mesmerizing nature of Jesus despite being a just rough-hewn mass of wood and pitch.

If nothing else, the boat says to me that Jesus can appear to us in places that we find completely familiar, perhaps in items that we think we know inside and out. There's something stunning about that, stunning and revitalizing. Moments when that happens are astounding and exhilarating. But this story also suggests that, once Jesus speaks to us in that way, we will never see that commonplace item the same again. If we wish to continue to learn from and to be transformed by Jesus, we will have to continue moving forward, letting go of old vessels...leaving the boats and everything else behind on the shore.

This is what we've got. We're not blessed with the privilege of living alongside the physical Jesus, listening to him teach and witnessing his miracles firsthand. Our encounters with Christ are more tenuous and abstract. We may be fortunate enough to have a moment or two when everything becomes clear to us, but my guess is that those moments are often so fleeting that we have a hard time trusting them. Despite this, they retain their power in our memories, a power that causes us to try to return to those places or objects in hopes of another drop of inspiration. They retain their power because, again, this is all we've got.

We call moments like these epiphanies. I won't try to speak for anyone else, but they are the highlights of my faith life. I crave moments when God becomes exquisitely apparent, often in the form of something I'm extremely familiar with. Sometimes I crave them so much that I come back to a place, or a worship service, or an object with tremendous expectation and anticipation. Epiphanies can be addictive like that.

The danger of an epiphany is that it can lead to idolatry. We find meaning in ordinary objects, meaning that entrances and inspires us, meaning that jolts and awes us...and then we fixate on the truth we've encountered, often at

the expense of other truths, and we especially can't let go of the object itself...even though it's still just the same plain object it was before.

You youth run across Jesus through much that we do here. When I ask you for examples, you name worship services, Bible studies, and retreats. Most frequently, you name our annual trip to Kure Beach. You speak about that building and its surroundings, share about meaningful times of silence and of conversation, and reflect on the worship services you've had there. You speak of it all with tremendous reverence. It's very satisfying to be part of that with you.

You only get to go there for five years. The tradition of our church going there is an extremely short one. As important as that place is to you, your relationship with it is an epiphany: brief but brilliant, hopefully with long-lasting aftershocks. And as you grow, you will continue to encounter other places, weekends, relationships, and experiences that will touch you in similar ways. This phenomenon I'm describing isn't unique to your youth...we are all seeking God in the ordinary, hoping to see evidence of Jesus' divinity and humanity in the everyday, yearning for a reflection of the totality of Christ in our common routine.

And when we get it, we should remember this: Jesus left the boat, and when he did, his disciples knew to leave the boat as well and go with him.