

Sermon: Purpose Fulfilled

New North Church, Hingham

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10 February 2019

Based on **Psalm 138; Luke 5:1-11**

It took me a while to find a way into these readings this morning. We have a psalm of thanksgiving paired with a Gospel account that is both a call narrative and a miracle story. And I thought, where to begin, because it all fits together.

As the psalmist said, life is full of trouble, and a life of thanksgiving to God does not provide a solution to every problem, especially the lingering problems of addiction and poverty, to name just two. Trouble persists in our lives even during thanksgiving and praise. You have heard it said that if you go looking for trouble, you will find it.

In the parable of the friend at midnight, told in Luke 11, it is persistence, and not necessarily friendship, that will get you what you need. And, on the other side of that story, when someone knocks on your door looking for help, you have to answer. You may not be able to provide for that person's needs in that moment, but just opening the door can give them strength, even if it doesn't seem that way at the time.

In the middle of today's Gospel reading, Luke tells a fishing story just before Jesus calls his first disciples.

Fishing was an important part of the Galilean economy in the first century. Work was life. And if you're fisherman who can't catch any fish, you didn't eat, your family didn't eat, and those you work with didn't eat. It was stressful to work that hard in a dangerous job and get no results, and these men have been fishing all night with nothing to show for it.

But Jesus is persuasive. When he told Simon Peter to try again over there, Simon Peter said, okay, even though he and his crew had worked all night and were tired and probably hungry. But even though they knew these waters better than any traveling rabbi could, they let down their nets.

The crowd that was so big it forced Jesus to do his teaching offshore, was still there to witness what happened next.

Throughout the Bible, abundant food signifies the presence or establishment of God's reign on earth. We see it in Exodus 16 with God providing manna from heaven; we see it in Isaiah 25 when God provides a feast of rich food and well-matured wines; we see it when Jesus feeds 5,000 men, women, and children with a few fish and some bread. We see it again today when Simon Peter and his partners haul in the most fish they have ever seen in their lives.

God's grace and blessing are often more than we expect or can handle all at once. Moses hid his face when he encountered God at the burning bush; Isaiah said, 'Woe is me!' when God called him to go to the people to prophesy; and here Simon Peter dropped to his knees, overwhelmed by the magnitude of God's power.

Remember this is also a call story. Realizing who they were dealing with and given the opportunity to become disciples to this extraordinary man, Simon Peter, along with James and John, the sons of Zebedee, 'left everything and followed him,' right out of the boats, straight from work. The form of service was not made clear at the time, just as Moses and Isaiah had no idea why they were being called by God; but all of them knew – they just *knew* – that following God was their next step.

And this is just the beginning. Throughout Luke's Gospel, more men and women were called, and they responded.

When the psalmist says to God, 'you have exalted your name and your *word* above everything,' he means that God can keep a promise. God faithfully keeps the covenant even when we do not, and those who respond to God's call, do so faithfully.

The record is clear: the disciples found both the presence of God and trouble when they left to follow Jesus, but just as it was God's right hand that delivered the Israelites out of Egypt, and God's right hand that extends blessings and gives strength to the weak, it is also God's right hand that delivers us from trouble, as the psalmist said it happened for him.

Who among us would, at any stage of life, leave everything to follow Jesus? For the fisherman by the Sea of Galilee, it was meant literally, because there's Jesus, looking you in the eye saying, 'Follow me,' so you do. But, in our time, we can keep our jobs and still be all-in, putting God first. We can follow in God's ways without leaving our families, homes or occupations. Today's readings give us a good opportunity to reflect

on how well we're doing, or plan to do, in our faith life. We can think about what it means to leave everything as an obedient response to Jesus' call. What, exactly, makes faith – meaning trust and reliance – in Jesus and in God possible in the modern world?

A life of thanksgiving to God provides hope for the future; it makes for a healthy relationship with God; and it keeps us focused on something greater than ourselves. As people of faith, we pray that, hopefully, at least some of God's steadfast love and faithfulness has rubbed off on us, or on anyone living a life of service to others.

We can't all be Mother Theresa or Martin Luther King, Jr. We all have flaws and weaknesses and regrets about the things we've done and the things we've left undone, just like Jesus' first disciples did, but we're trying, just as they did.

We can see God's blessings all around us. Our metaphorical nets are full. The food we will soon all share together in fellowship and in peace is God's gift, as we are all a gift to each other. And for that, we give thanks. We give thanks to God not just for the abundant food in this room today but for the abundance of life on the planet. We give thanks to God for hearing us when we cry out, and for giving us strength when we are weak. We give thanks to God for loving people like us, just as we are, and for showing us how to love ourselves and our neighbors. We give all thanks and praise to God.

Amen.