“Drop Your Nets” - Stephanie Sorge, 1/26/25

We get a story of overflowing nets the same morning we’re bracing ourselves to hear about our projected budget deficit. What good lectionary luck! Trust God, the fish will come, may it be so!

Actually, we *have* had this kind of surprising catch over the last couple of years - as you’ll hear more about soon. We’ve had some large and unexpected bequests that have filled our nets to overflowing - and beyond! The Finance team and Session have been wrestling with the question of how to be wise stewards of these funds for almost two years now. What do you do with a net full of fish that you never expected to catch?

Like Simon, we know that things are changing. I spent some time trying to see things from his point of view. He was a fisherman. Probably had been all his life, just like his father before him, and his father before him. He was doing well enough for himself and his family, just living his life, and then he met Jesus. Early on, Jesus had healed his mother-in-law, who had suddenly spiked a high fever. Here I always want to make a joke about mothers-in-law - “was that a blessing?” - but I’ll let Rodney Dangerfield keep that one.

What I find interesting is that Simon had a mother-in-law, which confirms that he had a wife. A family. Jesus didn’t just round up the bachelors of Galilee to join him in his work. It would have been culturally weird - I think that’s the correct anthropological description - for Simon and the others to have been single. When it came time to leave the boats, they weren’t just leaving boats.

Anyway, Jesus had fled Nazareth and made his way to Capernaum, where he taught in the synagogue and began healing people. Simon’s mother-in-law seemed to be a tipping point. After she was healed, people were coming night and day to find Jesus, to ask him for a miracle. Jesus couldn’t get away, even if he tried - and he did try. Simon probably felt pity on him, and was more than happy to row Jesus out a ways from the shore to get a little space. Even if he had been working all night.

I imagine he was a little less generous in spirit when Jesus told him to go out into the deeper water and drop his nets again. I can almost hear Simon’s inner monologue, “Sure thing, carpenter’s son. From landlocked Nazareth. Tell me how to fish. In the middle of the day. On my boat. Which I paid for by being a good fisherman. No problem.” Whatever he was thinking, it would have been silenced by the abundance of fish. TOO many fish. More than he could handle alone. Almost too much for Simon and the other boat of fishermen. I’m not surprised that he asked Jesus to leave.

When Simon met Jesus, his whole world expanded. I bet he had no idea how many people were hurting and in need, until he saw them showing up at his door, looking for Jesus. It was too much. It even seemed to be too much for Jesus at times. That net full of fish was an indication that Jesus was inviting him into something far bigger than he would have ever chosen for himself. No, thank you!

But he did it. They rowed back to shore, and Simon left everything behind. Boat. Nets. Fish. Family. His life would never be the same.

Have you ever wondered about the fish? Did they just stay flopping around in the boats? Or was the crowd who had gathered to hear Jesus blessed by this unexpected bounty? Maybe the fish provided an influx of income to help sustain Simon’s family after he left. We don’t know. Because the fish aren’t the point of the story. That’s just a red herring. This isn’t primarily a story of abundance in the face of scarcity. It’s a story about the life-altering invitation to follow Jesus Christ.

This is a story about encountering Jesus Christ and trusting him enough to follow. Thank God Jesus didn’t expect everyone he met to drop everything and follow him, even if there is a strong encouragement to hold things loosely.

At the heart of this story is Jesus’s instruction to drop the nets. He tells Simon to do the thing he knows best - the thing that gives him life, and fulfillment - and see what God can do. Simon had to be open to new ways of thinking and doing. He shouldn’t have caught anything, but he did. Clearly this was far bigger than himself.

Bringing the analogy back to the church, how do we drop our nets? This isn’t a question of resources. It’s not an illustration of God’s material blessings when we follow God’s call. This is us, after a long night of work. We might be tired. We might not be a spry as we used to be. What God is asking is for us to drop our nets - to use what we already have along with our gifts and experience, and see what God can do. We have what we need to respond to God’s call. What happens with it when we respond faithfully - that’s all about what God does.

Simon could have stayed. He could have lived a full life as a simple fisherman, and it would have been good and rewarding. But Jesus drew his gaze beyond his own immediate world. He saw the needs pressing in, but they were now faces. Names. People who encountered Jesus and who’s lives were forever changed. Not in a million years would he have thought that he would be part of that kind of life-transforming work. What did he have to offer? He had a boat. A net. And he knew how to fish.

Staying within the safety of our comfort zones is a privilege that not everyone has. We could choose to stay relatively insulated from what happens in Washington, or Richmond. Most of us are not currently facing existential threats. Until we are. But following Jesus draws our focus up, and out, to those who are pressing in on all sides. The faces of people in need of a miracle or two.

I don’t think we know quite what the call is right now, but we can be ready to get in our boats and row out to the deep water. We can prepare to drop our nets where Jesus sends us.

I’m reminded of the quote attributed to Rabbi Tarfon in the Talmud: “Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justly, now. Love mercifully, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.” God is doing a new thing. Don’t be afraid.

We have what we need. You’ll see that in our financial report, too. Right now, we have what we need to do what we’re doing. And I trust that whatever it is God calls us to do, we will have what we need to do it. We just need to be ready to drop our nets.