

Please take time to read today's preaching text from Luke 5:1-11.

Grace and peace be unto you from God our heavenly Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.

Last November, our preaching text was from the prophet Isaiah, chapter six and I shared with you a three-word summary of the entire reading. It went like this, "Wow! Woe. Wow!" I would not be surprised if some of you remember it because it's quite catchy. The first Wow! is for the awesome picture that Isaiah is given of God seated on the throne — it is so amazing that even the seraphs (the angels present) cannot look upon God's radiance directly. Wow!

But then came the Woe. "Woe is me," Isaiah said. "I must be dead," or, "I must be about to die" were the thoughts that Isaiah must have been thinking as he witnessed such a sight. But that is not what God intends. Instead, God offered a second "Wow!" God sent one of the seraphs to touch Isaiah's lips with a live coal and rather than burning him, the angel tells him that his sin is wiped out. Wow! Just like that? Even though I am so not worthy? Yep, that's right. God sent his Son Jesus to 'wow us' with God's love — not to condemn us.

Now, one element of a good sermon is that people might remember some of the key points of it. So as I thought about our Gospel lesson for today, I wondered if it might work to provide you with the same three-word summary? Wow! Woe. Wow! Let's take a look together, shall we?

This story begins rather ordinarily. Jesus is "standing beside the Lake of Gennesaret" or, as it is more commonly known, Galilee. "And the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God." So, at this particular time, on this particular day, Jesus was teaching, not healing or casting out demons or anything super dramatic like that. Hmm, I'm not hearing anything to "wow us" just yet.

That said, it is rather fascinating that Jesus is there, in that place... hanging out and teaching with the fishing crowd and he is doing so, quite intentionally. Now this might be easy for us to miss because it is so familiar to our ears, but much like today, there was a social/cultural hierarchy that was well established in Jesus' day. You know what I'm talking

about: rich above the poor, of course. Men thought of as higher than women — although in most cases wealth would be given preference over gender. They also had clear distinctions of “clean” over “unclean.” Or, to put it more coarsely, non-menstruating women over menstruating women. And, of course, practically any working profession over shepherds, tanners (because they handled dead animals and blood), and fishermen. While it could be said that fishermen were the least worst of these three, that still doesn’t say much — no respectable person would invite this lot to their Passover party if they could help it. Yet quite clearly, Jesus doesn’t care about these kinds of things — a social/cultural hierarchy? Watching how Jesus lived, you can see how he flipped that hierarchy on its head by spending far more time with people that the “higher ups” would deem unworthy.

Anyway, so here Jesus is, rubbing shoulders and spending time with the folks that most “reputable” people would not have a whole lot to do with. Jesus is most welcome and appreciated here — he is granted his wish to use Simon’s boat as a floating podium from which to continue his teaching. And when he wraps up his teaching of the crowds, he turns to Simon and doesn’t ask him, but he tells him to, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”

Now, this isn’t the real “Wow!” moment of the story (yet) but it is pretty gutsy of Jesus. It got me to thinking, “Wow, he’s got some nerve telling a professional how to do his job.” What might be the typical response of a person like Simon Peter? Well, let’s just say it would very likely include a few choice words not appropriate for use in a Sunday sermon, am I right? Besides having a carpenter telling a fisherman how to do his job, we also have the fact that Simon’s wrapping up his business for the day — everything is being cleaned up and put away. Simon had to be thinking, now you expect me to do this? Simon Peter’s reasoning is that letting down the nets once more will be a seriously futile effort. “Master, Sir, uh, well, you see, with all due respect, we have fished all night long but have caught nothing.” And yet... somehow... was it Jesus’ authority or perhaps his charisma or some of both? Somehow, Peter chooses to obey. “Yet, if you say so, I will let down the nets.” Simon sounds a bit like the young Mary well before him, remember her

response to the angel Gabriel that she will have a baby? She asks, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” Yet somehow she chooses to submit to God’s will saying, “Here am I... let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:34, 38). In our limited understanding, what God is up to doesn’t always make sense. In truth, sometimes it even seems ridiculous, yet being open to what God is doing opens up worlds of possibilities.

For when we do, that, in this story anyway, that is precisely when the “Wow!” moment occurs. No sooner had the fishermen let down their nets, “they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them.” Take note of this and remember it. Even while you may be right in the middle of a “Wow!” moment, when you may be overwhelmed — from something good or not so good — signal others to help you. Even so, we are told that “they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink.” Wow! This is unlike any catch of fish they had ever seen. This is a super abundance — this should remind us of the gallons and gallons of water changing to wine at the wedding in Cana or the five loaves and two fish that were enough to feed a multitude and still have some left over. God’s abundance is tremendous – wow!

Yet now it comes, we go from wow! to woe in a matter of seconds. Peter suddenly recognizes what’s really happening. He has an epiphany and realizes that he is in the presence of the real and living God and so he reacts by falling down on his knees and saying, “Woe is me.” Well, not in those *exact words* but he says, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” His response to being in the presence of the Holy One is very much like that story from Isaiah. Peter is gobsmacked and sees himself as totally undeserving, “I am sinful. I am not worthy. Go away from me” he says to Jesus. We are told that he and the others are all amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken and Peter’s realization that he is in the presence of God and is witnessing God’s power makes him feel afraid.

Yet again though, like in the story of Isaiah’s call, we end up not with woe but with a final Wow! Indeed, Peter’s response to God’s power revealed through Jesus is appropriate, it definitely warrants a reaction of ‘woe is me!’ yet Jesus responds by saying

to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” Jesus’ response to Peter’s fear is to comfort him and to call upon him to join with him in his mission. That to me is the second Wow! moment. Jesus knew Peter was not perfect, he knew him to be “just a fisherman” but nevertheless, Jesus wants Peter to join with him in this mighty mission that God sent Jesus to accomplish.

As peace activist and preacher William Sloane Coffin says in his book *Credo*, “Christ is not looking for extraordinary people but for *ordinary* men and women who do ordinary things extraordinarily well.” I hope and pray that we will avoid our past tendency which has often been to remain stuck. We are blessed by God with a Wow! — an overabundance but we feel woe, we feel undeserving or we don’t fully appreciate the abundance of the blessing. That’s why God presents us with the great, Good News again and again. We are offered that second Wow! which is this: Wow, God loves me, ordinary person that I am. And wow, God forgives me, sinful person that I am. And wow, God has a place for me in God’s worldwide family. And wow, despite everything God knows about me, God is calling me to join in this mighty mission to catch people with God’s superabundant love. Amen

Narrative.3.2 Luke 5:1-11
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