

From Now On

**A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on August 29, 2021
Friendship Presbyterian Church**

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret [also known as the Sea of Galilee], and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."

When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So, they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon.

Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.
(Luke 5:1-11, NRSV)

The story of the call of the first disciples may be a very familiar story to many of us, or at least the basic outline may be familiar. Jesus walks along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. He calls a ragtag band of fishermen to drop everything and follow him, and miraculously, they do. But as is so often the case, there's a lot underneath the surface here, waiting for us to discover it.

Galilee was part of the Roman province of Judea, and the Roman province of Judea was part of the larger Roman Empire. But though it was a province, Judea was not ruled by Rome directly; Rome put Herod in charge – Herod the Great (the arch-villain of the Nativity story). Herod's job was to keep the peace and, more importantly, to keep the tax money coming in, and he did his job very well. If anyone made any trouble, if anyone whispered a word against Rome, they were dealt with swiftly and severely. Herod built a new, magnificent temple in Jerusalem—not because he was such a pious man (far from it!), but because he knew it would draw in the tourists.

When Herod the Great died not long after Jesus was born, his son Herod Antipas took over, and he fixed his sights on Galilee. He built a new capitol city in honor of Emperor Tiberius – appropriately called Tiberius. And he built it right along the Sea of Galilee.

Now, Herod Antipas wasn't just trying to please the Emperor. He was also trying to get control of the lucrative fishing industry. People had fished the Sea of Galilee for generations, but Herod knew that if he could get control of these waters, he could turn fish into big business.

All these changes were happening in the lifetimes of Jesus and his disciples. Most of the disciples were fishermen. They would have fished the Sea of Galilee their whole lives. And they would have seen it change. Where once they had fished freely, now they had permits and taxes and quotas. Rome was butting in and taking over. These future disciples once fished by the grace of God. Now they fished by the grace of Rome.

Rome did two things really well: peace and prosperity. Of course, it kept the peace by crushing anyone who made trouble. And its prosperity was based on squeezing the people at the bottom. But, if these fishermen would just keep their heads down and their mouths shut, they could survive. Rome would throw them a fish every now and then.

It didn't take much imagination to see in Rome the perfect manifestation of those against whom the prophet Habakkuk had preached centuries earlier ... against kings and empires which were built on exploitation, oppression, and violence:

*Look at the proud!
Their spirit is not right in them,
but the righteous live by their faith.
Moreover, wealth is treacherous;
the arrogant do not endure.
They open their throats wide as Sheol;
like Death they never have enough.
They gather all nations for themselves,
and collect all peoples as their own ...
"Alas for you who build a town by bloodshed,
and found a city on iniquity!"*

Then along came an agitator named Jesus. And Jesus had a simple message: The world does not belong to Rome ... The world belongs to *God*. He called it "the kingdom of God" or the "kingdom of heaven." *God* reigns, not Rome, Jesus said, and it's time to start living that truth and spreading that word, that *God's* word would one day be fulfilled for the whole world:

*[For] the earth will be filled
with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord,
as the waters cover the sea.*

That's the background to this story of Jesus' call to his first disciples, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus has begun his public ministry and already seems to be drawing crowds eager to hear this message. In fact, the crowds on this shore are of such size that Jesus is forced to

commandeer a fishing boat and set out a bit from land, in order to be heard by the most people. The people know that something special is happening!

When Jesus finishes his teaching, he addresses Simon, the fisherman whose boat he has used, suggesting to him that they set sail out into the deep water and let down the nets again for a catch. I can only imagine what reaction that suggestion triggered in the weary fisherman. He and fellow workers had been hard at work all night in Rome's controlled and depleted waters and caught nothing. And what does a preacher know about fishing anyway?! But something inside Simon gives in. "Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."

And so, they launch out again. And they let down the nets ... and the nets are soon filled with more fish than the boat could handle by itself, and they have to call for help from the other boat ... both boats nearly sinking from the sheer mass of the catch!

Can you even imagine the faces of those weary men as they scrambled about, hauling in the catch and trying to keep their boats afloat?! Can you imagine Simon looking over at Jesus himself, to see his face, to see his eyes, speaking more loudly than words could: *You see? All Rome can give you is empty nets. But with God there is abundance, more than enough for everyone.*

I think in this story that Jesus is putting three questions to his would-be disciples, and to us:
To whom does the world belong, Rome or God?
And if the world belongs to God, what should it look like?
And if the world doesn't look like that, then what are you going to do about it?

These fishermen were all Jews, so they knew how to answer that first question. We see it in the very first chapter of the very first book of the Bible: "In the beginning *God* created the heavens and the earth." We see it the psalms: "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it; the world, and those who live in it." The world belongs to *God*.

As uneducated as they were, even these fishermen knew *those* words. But they had been laboring under Rome's rule for so long, they had almost forgotten their meaning. Rome had nearly succeeded in making God unbelievable and irrelevant ... But then, Jesus came along and rekindled those old memories. Facing something soaring over his comprehension, and somehow sensing that his life is about to change forever, Simon falls at Jesus' feet and tearfully says, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

"Don't be afraid," Jesus responds. "From now on, you will be catching people."

From now on. Something new has begun, and you are being swept up into it. Your life will never be the same, for *from now on*, your life will be lived for the Kingdom of God. You will never again live a life defined by your oppressors, but live a life rooted and grounded in *God's* loving and gracious rule over all things.

Yes, the world belongs to God. And if the world belongs to God, then what should it look like? Recall those great words of the prophet Micah:

*What does the Lord require of [us],
but to do justice and to love kindness
and to walk humbly with our God? (Micah 6:8)*

Justice – where *Everyone* has enough;

Kindness – where *Everyone* has a place.

Walk humbly – Because we know the One who holds all things together.

That's how the world should look if it belongs to God. And if it doesn't look that way, and it *didn't* look that way under Rome, then what are you going to do about it? *That* is the Kingdom's challenge.

Some decided to drop their nets and pick up their swords and go off to battle with Rome. But that's not what Jesus had in mind. "Don't be afraid," he said to Simon. From now on, you won't be pulling fish out of the Sea of Galilee – not anymore. No, from now on, you'll be pulling *people* out – out of Rome and its false promises and on to the free and abundant shores of the kingdom of God. Your work will no longer be about drawing in fish, but about drawing in human beings created in the image of God and leading them into this healing Light. We're going to teach, and we're going to heal, and we're going to feed, and we're going to forgive — and *that* is how we will change the world.

Those fishermen of old answered the call and began spreading this word that the world belonged to God ... that the justice and kindness of God were more powerful than the so-called peace and prosperity of Rome. Of course, it should come as no surprise that Rome did not take kindly to that. As long as you keep your head down and your mouth shut, Rome will ignore you. But if you start making trouble, Rome will deal with you swiftly and severely. Jesus made too much trouble, and a cross awaited him.

Of course, that wasn't the end of the story. Rome thought it had snuffed out a little fire. But Jesus had ignited that fire in his disciples, and they passed it on to others, and they passed it on to others, and that fire still burns today, almost 2,000 years later. People the world over know the name Jesus and answer his call to life in the kingdom of God. Few people outside the UGA Classics department really even remember the name Tiberius anymore.

This was Jesus' call to Simon long ago, and it is his call to us today, as we meet Jesus on the seashore and hear his call once again. And the call *does* still come to us. I'll leave it to your imagination to fill out the story. You can decide where the Sea of Galilee is in your life, you can decide what you're really fishing for, you can decide who Rome really is. We may fill out the story in different ways.

But the central questions are the same, for all of us:

*To whom does the world belong, Rome or God?
And if the world does belong to God, what should it look like?
And if the world doesn't look like that, then what are you going to do about it?*

Jesus believed the world could be different. He thought there could be *enough* for everyone, there could be a *place* for everyone, that, together, we could walk humbly with God. And he invites us not to permit the world as we find it to limit what is possible, but instead to trust that the world can—that the world *must*—reflect God's justice and kindness.

And so, we build these communities, like Friendship Presbyterian Church, as outposts of the kingdom, colonies of Heaven, where we teach and heal and feed and forgive, where we practice God's justice and kindness, where we keep the fire burning.

And as we so build and teach and heal and feed and forgive, as we practice God's justice and kindness, may the Spirit's fire burn in us, that we may ever leave the nets of our lives behind and follow, that that Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus long ago may, one day, be manifest for all humankind – and the earth be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea!

To the glory of God! Amen.