

**Fifth Sunday after The Epiphany – February 4, 2007  
Ascension Episcopal Church, Hinton, WV  
Luke 5:1-11 The Call of the First Disciples**

***The Rev. Kent Higgins***

From the Gospel: *“Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.”*<sup>1</sup>

This morning, I'd like to talk with you about a rather personal topic, a topic suggested by the Gospel reading. The topic has to do with hearing God's call. Is there such a thing for us, and if there is, how do we know it to be valid?

It may not be immediately obvious why I see this as such a personal topic, but please recall that I have, as of this morning, been an ordained minister of The Episcopal Church for the very short time of fifty days. This business of “are you called by God” is very real. In a few short months, God willing, I will be ordained priest, and the question will be asked again.

I think that all of us have to face the question of God's call on or to us at one time or another in our lives, and if your experience is anything like mine, it's not an easy, comfortable experience. Maybe you have wrestled with the question already. Maybe you are doing so now. Maybe your time has not yet come. My hope is that this sermon will help you respond.

The Gospel story today centers on a fisherman, Simon, who was called Peter. This is the fellow for whom the great church in Rome is named – obviously

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, S. Lk 5:10

something happened between the time he was a fisherman and when he was considered the rock on which Jesus would build the church.

Frankly, in today's story, I don't think Peter has a clue what's going on around him. As I read the Gospel, he and some others have been hard at work all day, and they have nothing to show for their labors. He's exhausted. It's hard work hauling nets out of the water, and disappointing to find them empty. But whether you catch fish or not, you still have to clean the nets to be ready to go out again the next day. And that's what Peter and his co-workers are doing.

They're probably not paying a whole lot of attention to what the fellow is saying to the crowd of people on the shore. Maybe they know Jesus by reputation; maybe not. When Jesus steps into Peter's boat and asks him to "...put out a little way from the shore,"<sup>2</sup> I doubt very much that Peter is being anything more than just a tired man, who has had a disappointing day, and who is just too tired to argue with the preacher. And so he does what he is asked to do. No great expectations; no idea that he'll get anything for his effort; possibly a little resentful that he'll get home later than he'd planned, coupled with some relief at not having to come home empty handed – at least not right away.

After he finishes speaking to the crowd, Jesus displays the compassion that is his normal response to a situation of need. He tells Peter to put out his nets again. Peter doesn't say what he really thinks. After all, he's the fisherman in this boat, and he's spent all day without catching a thing, and now some itinerant preacher is telling him to work some more, when Peter knows he won't catch anything.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, S. Lk 5:3

Why does he do it? Does he sense something special about Jesus that inspires him to hope for a good catch? I can't support that from the text we have. I see a man who is just too tired to argue, who is reasonably polite, and who does what he's asked to do.

The results, of course, are amazing! Peter and his companions are presented with a catch of fish like nothing they've ever seen. So many fish, in fact, that their boat almost sinks.

In a moment, tiredness is forgotten. Peter's brother Andrew is already in the boat with him, and Peter calls to his friends, among them James and John, sons of Zebedee, and they fill both boats with fish. They are all elated, and Peter realizes that this catch has been guided by something way beyond his own abilities to know where to cast his nets.

Peter recognizes in Jesus someone he calls "Lord," not, I think, because he then sees him as the Messiah he will someday acknowledge, but because clearly this is a special person. Frankly, it causes him some trepidation, because Peter is, as he says, "a sinful man." And Simon Peter says to Jesus, you need to associate with someone better than me – I'm not a good enough person for someone like you.

And then comes the famous line, which Matthew and Mark render as "I will make you fishers of men." And what follows next has fascinated me for all of my life -- for literally the first time I read it. This group of men, partners in a small business with family responsibilities, leave everything they have to follow Jesus.

Why? It may seem natural enough to us now, knowing what will happen, but these fellows didn't know. They had no rational reason to go with Jesus, but follow him they did.

Some of you are old enough to recall a Sunday comic strip called “Mandrake the Magician.” It’s long since gone, but Mandrake could do rather amazing things, and get people to do what he wanted. And every time, the formula was the same: Mandrake would ‘gesture hypnotically.’ Do you remember?

I used to wonder if Jesus “gestured hypnotically.” For me at the time, it was as good an explanation as I had.

And then God called me. The instrument he used was the then-bishop of West Virginia, Wilburn C. Campbell. I was studying in his *West Virginia School of Religion*, and we were meeting at Sandscrest in Wheeling. This was over thirty years ago, but I doubt I will ever forget the experience of Bishop Campbell, sitting at the head of that long dining room table, me sitting at the other end, and his saying, right in the middle of lunch, “Kent, when are you going to seminary?”

It was, to me at least, a question completely out of the blue. As you can imagine, conversation at the table stopped. And I responded, “Bishop, I didn’t know I was.” To which he replied, “Let’s talk.”

We did. He arranged for Gail and me to spend a weekend at the seminary in Alexandria, and we came back home. Gail and I were newly married. It wasn’t real clear what we were going to do with our lives. We talked and prayed about it. Gail encouraged me to do it, and I refused.

I was so scared that I ran away from the idea of seminary. I went to Bishop Campbell and told him I just did not feel I had a call to be a priest. He didn’t argue with me. All he said was, “If God wants you to do this, he will nag you.” And that was it. Except obviously it wasn’t, for here I am, Deacon Higgins.

Why did I refuse God’s call (as I now believe it was. The bishop wasn’t calling me. He was just the bearer of the invitation)? Why did I say no?

Part of the answer is that years before my conversation with the bishop, I had read sermons for the vacationing rectors of Saint Andrew's in Oak Hill. I was fifteen or sixteen, and I could read aloud and at-sight pretty well. In fact, I won the reading-at-sight medal at Episcopal High School, where I was a student.

The sermons I was given to read were written by Theodore Parker Ferris, then rector of Trinity Church, Boston, and one of the great preachers of his time. Great material, well delivered, no question about it, this was the best preaching those folks had heard in a long time.

And after church, person after person, but especially the little old ladies of the congregation, would shake my hand and say "You're going to be a wonderful priest." I understood them to be deciding this based on all the wrong reasons. OK, I can read. That's no call from God. I simply would not explore it. I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life, but I was afraid to commit to being a priest without something more than this.

When Gail and I came back to West Virginia in nineteen-ninety-nine, an element of peace was introduced into both our lives. We were, in a very real sense, "back home." And the nagging voice that Bishop Campbell had spoken of came to me, but this time, I listened. It was still scary, but I suppose I had matured enough to take the idea seriously.

Nearly seven years later, after a lot of work, a lot of time invested, an enormous amount of support and encouragement from many people, most of all from Gail, you see before you someone who truly believes he has been called to do what he is doing.

People see me in clericals and say, "You look good in a collar." I think that's true, but more to the point, I feel good in a collar. I feel like I'm doing what I'm supposed to do.

I still worry that I'll make some dumb mistakes, or simply not know how to respond to some need that is presented to me, but the worry doesn't keep me from doing what I know I need to do.

This sermon has been, as I told you it would be, very personal. I wanted you to hear my story in case you are wondering about what God is calling you to be. If you are, I hope it helps to know that responding to God's call can be frightening. It is something from which you can run, but I now know, it is not something from which you can comfortably hide forever.

What have I learned that I would have you know? I have come to believe that God offers each of us opportunities for fulfillment. We are offered the chance to make a difference in this world, in the lives of perhaps only one or two other people, but the opportunity is there. When we do it, we will know the feeling I have wearing a clerical collar.

I do not claim to be a proficient spiritual guide, but if any of you feels I can help, call me. Talk to your friends. I don't think most of us hear the kind of call that came to Peter, Andrew, James and John. I don't think we are necessarily asked to leave everything, but I do think that every believer is called. The question is, to what? And by the way, I am sure that many of you are already doing exactly what God has in mind for you.

I invite you to think about vocation, about what you are doing with your life, to pray about it, and to listen for what Bishop Campbell called the nagging voice of God. The world is a place full of opportunities to serve. God bless you in your work.