

Lectionary 3 B 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

January 24, 2021

Mark 1:14-20

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

In the fourth century, the Roman emperor Constantine embraced the Christian religion, and after centuries of on-again, off-again persecution, Christians gained legal status. This was a drastic moment in the Christian religion. It had repercussions on everything. One thing that happened was that the cross became a symbol of Christianity. Prior to Constantine, the cross was not often used as a symbol of the Christian faith. Jesus' death and resurrection were keys to the meaning of Christianity, but the actual tool used for Jesus' death was not cherished.

Constantine was said to have had a vision involving the cross, and had been instructed in that vision to use it as a symbol of protection. His mother, Helen (or Helena), explored the Holy Land and built many churches there. And in her travels there, she came into possession of the true cross, or what was believed to be the actual cross on which Jesus died. So it was in the fourth century that the cross became a celebrated symbol of Christianity, and gained its status as a sign of protection and blessing. But that had not been the case for three hundred years. The cross, like the guillotine or the gallows or the gas chamber, is a tool of death, a method of capital punishment. It's unusual to have such a thing adorning church buildings and just about everything else.

Prior to the cross, there was an assortment of symbols, but probably the most ubiquitous symbol of Christianity was the fish. In our gospel reading today, Jesus recruits four men whose daily work is fishing. "Follow me," Jesus says, "and I will make you fish for people." Is Jesus just being clever? Or is there something more to his choice of words? Fish became such a common symbol in the early church. Is there a chance Jesus is doing more than just playing with words?

The fish that adorned early Christian mosaics and drawings and inscription were often depicted with bread. A reminder of the feeding of the five thousand, in which a small amount of fish and bread fed a multitude. It's described in all four gospels, but in John's gospel it is accompanied by Jesus' words that he is the bread of life. So fish and bread came to be a symbol of the eucharist. We commonly think of wine and vines and chalices as symbols that belong adjacent to bread. But it seems that fish were a primary symbol of the eucharist, and it may be that in some communities, the meal really was celebrated with bread and fish rather than bread and wine. It's hard to know. After Constantine, there would be more documentation. Heck, after Constantine, there would be a Bible. The early church is sometimes stranger and more mysterious to us than the church that came in the centuries that followed.

In addition to the feeding of the five thousand, there are two resurrection stories of Jesus that involve eating fish. So fish were an early sign of the sacrament of the eucharist, the meal in which we are miraculously nourished, and in which the risen and living Christ joins himself with us.

There are more reasons why the fish became a symbol of Christianity. One simple creed of Christianity is that “Jesus Christ is the Son of God and Savior.” In Greek, which was the language of the New Testament and the early Church, there is an acrostic in which the first letter of each of those words spells the Greek word for fish, *ichthus*. Iota Chi Theta Upsilon Sigma. That’s not a sorority. Jesus Christ Son of God Savior. Which spells fish. So, a symbol that already had meaning for Christians conveniently spelled out a kind of abbreviated creed about the identity and meaning of Jesus.

This morning, I suggest that in the ancient imagination, fish seemed to have a kind of senseless existence, and they lived in a world of chaos and darkness. Our modern perception of the ocean and of the collective beauty and intelligence of schools of swimming fish is not how they saw it back then. Back before science, back before Jacques Cousteau. Certainly, for the people who read Genesis and wrote Genesis, what we call outer space was all water. Today we feel that the earth, the third rock from the sun, is an oasis of life in a very cold and violent and arbitrary universe. A place where any of us would instantaneously die. For the people who first read the Bible and wrote the Bible, the universe was water, and we were a precarious sphere of light and land created and protected by God. Without God’s intervention, it was a watery version of outer space. A dark, cold, chaotic abyss where humans could not survive.

In the gospels, the Sea of Galilee almost becomes a character, an opponent to Jesus, an enemy. It’s a large, inland freshwater lake. Prone to very sudden weather patterns that create quite powerful storms. In the gospels, the Sea of Galilee is clearly a boundary between Jewish lands and Gentile lands, between Jewish culture and religion and other people. But it is first and foremost a body of water. A dangerous body of water. And in the gospels, Jesus demonstrates his power over this foe. He walks on water. He tells the storm to be still. He tells Peter to try throwing his nets on the other side of the boat. In all of these cases, Jesus is demonstrating his mastery over the universe.

Jesus says something intriguing in the gospels [Matt 12:43//Luke 11:24] that when a demon is driven out of a person it can’t find a place in the arid and dry places, so it might return to the place from which it was expelled. The implication is that demons go into the water. That’s their home. When the “legion” of demons enters the pigs, the pigs drown themselves in the ocean. So the Sea of Galilee is like an opponent of Jesus. The Sea of Galilee is chaos and darkness and fear and violence.

And these men— Simon, Andrew, John, James— make their living by gliding across the surface of that water, and drawing out fish from that wild lake in their nets. And when Jesus calls them

to join him in his enterprise, he tells them that they will be fishing for people. They will be drawing people out of chaos and darkness and fear and violence and into a new existence. A better existence. One of purpose and light and faith and peace.

Now, it's not a perfect analogy. We're more familiar with the idea of shepherds and sheep. And fish, when they are caught and taken out of the water, they die. So we don't see ourselves as fish so much as we like to see ourselves as sheep. Even though the death of our old selves is included in the call to join with Jesus. Even lambs die in the New Testament.

But the invitation— the call— from Jesus to fish for people suggests that James and John and Andrew and Peter— and by extension me and you— are going to be launching out into the dangerous and scary places— the boundary places— and we will be bringing people out of chaos and into purpose. Out of darkness into light. Out of fear into faith. Out of violence into peace.

That fishing metaphor frames our mission almost as a kind of search and rescue. Rather than some kind of subsistence living. It's a big mission. With a lot of water to cover, and a lot of fish in the sea. But it's a mission that has the power to not only overcome the bad things, but to transform them into good things. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near," Jesus declares today. Come and see. Amen.