

Christians see the world differently from other people, or at least, we're supposed to. Some Christians are uncomfortable with miracle stories, like the one in today's Gospel. I think this is because some Christians are so accustomed to the secularism of the academic disciplines, where the existence, let alone the intervention, of God is not so much as considered in their methods or theory. But there are so many miracle stories in Scripture that we can only conclude that they were extremely important to the people who knew Jesus firsthand. Perhaps because they knew they needed help seeing the world the way Jesus would have them see it.

One of my pet peeves is when people who have little to no experience in a field think they know how to do a job better than people who have actually been working in that field for years. There are so many shows about doctors, lawyers, and police officers that a lot of people think they know what those jobs are like and how to do them properly. People who have gone to school or eaten in a restaurant think they know better than teachers, principals, servers, and chefs. And for clergy, well, you can imagine.

So I can really connect to Peter today. Very quickly, this Simon is the same Peter who would be foremost among the disciples, and the lake of Gennesaret is the same thing as the Sea of Galilee. Anyway, Peter and his fishing partners had just cleaned their nets after a long and frustrating night on the lake. Cleaning the nets was a chore, but an important one, as it would make the nets last longer. It was also one they would have to repeat if they decided to try again. But where Peter and company saw futility, Jesus saw opportunity.

You can easily imagine Peter's weariness and wariness, and perhaps even sarcasm, when he says, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." Perhaps he wanted to say, "Oh, we've just been doing this for years, professionally, but what do we know?"

Being proven wrong doesn't seem to have bothered Peter. My friend Fr. Matt Tucker found some research that calculated just how much all the fish would have weighed, and how much they would have been worth. A team of scientists estimated the weight of the catch as 62,696 pounds, with a value of at least 12 years' wages, possibly as high as 36 years.* Almost certainly more value than Peter or his partners had ever seen at once, and it was theirs.

Being proven wrong doesn't seem to have bothered Peter, but something clearly did. You'd think he'd be delighted, or maybe thank Jesus, but the first thing he says is, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Maybe he felt guilty for his earlier skepticism. Maybe he interpreted the superabundant catch as God teasing him for his lack of faith.

But I think Peter was developing a new way of seeing, in the light of a miracle. He had already addressed Jesus as "master." He had just heard Jesus preaching, and Jesus had healed his mother-in-law. But there were other teachers and other healers.

Only God could control the natural world. Seeing Jesus do this made Peter understand who Jesus was in a way he hadn't before, and in seeing the utter Godliness of Jesus, Peter also, unavoidably, saw his own utter ungodliness.

A modern skeptic might say that the catch of fish was a lucky accident or coincidence, or an exaggeration. They might say the whole story was made up, though they couldn't then explain why Peter gave up his livelihood and, ultimately, his life, to proclaim that Jesus is Lord. Regardless, there is another epiphany in this story, another way in which Jesus shows himself to be divine.

After Peter declares his own sinfulness, Jesus might have told him, "Go and sin no more." But no. Or he might have told him to sell the fish and give the money to the poor. Also no. Instead, Jesus immediately commissions Peter to recruit more disciples of Jesus.

When Jesus says, "from now on you will be catching people," the word translated "catching" was commonly used to describe how teachers "caught" their students, kind of like how we might say someone has caught our attention. And to Jesus, nothing was more important.

Just like in the Old Testament stories of God commissioning Moses, Jeremiah, and today, Isaiah, as prophets, the person being commissioned gives some reason why he can't do it and God brushes the objection away. Between that and mastering nature, Jesus's divinity is now obvious to the informed reader.

We should begin to consider the implications of this story for us. Jesus created a movement, not a cult of personality. Although it is right to worship Jesus, worship is the beginning of the Christian life, not the end. From his first encounters with the disciples, Jesus engages with them, equips them, and encourages them to use their gifts, skills, and resources to advance his holy mission.

Miracles show that God intervenes in human history, and specifically, that God uses the natural world to advance divine goals. God used fish to inspire Peter, James, and John, and then God used Peter, James, and John to spread the Gospel. When we hear the phrases "catching people" or the more old-fashioned "fishers of men," we might picture enticing, tricking, or trapping people out of their natural environment in order to heave them, cold, wet, and disoriented, onto the deck to be weighed and valued as commodities, and think, I do not want to do that. Fortunately, that is not what Jesus wants, either. And so there's another miracle in this story, a miracle glimmering, appropriately enough, just beneath the surface.

The miracle is that the metaphor of catching people breaks down with a glorious metamorphosis. The miracle is that the ones who are caught are not weighed and sold off. The ones who are caught become catchers. Being caught is not the end of their lives, but the beginning of a more capable and consequential life than they ever would have had if they had stayed in the sea.

Think about it. The disciples received the Holy Spirit and became apostles, and

set about bringing the Good News of God's unconditional love to the entire world. Now the Good News has reached us. All of us only know the Gospel because someone told us. And the Gospel has transformed us, given us a different way of seeing the world, a broader and deeper perspective, the assurance of God's love, mercy, and grace, and the inherent value of every person, given us a different set of values from that of the world, given us a mission and the confidence to carry it out, given us the joy of fellowship in this life and reunion with God in the next.

Some people have asked me what my strategic vision is for Advent. Quite simply, my vision is to continue advancing God's mission the same way the church has always done. Unless or until I figure out how to preach in a way that attracts such large crowds that people press in on each other and create a dangerous situation, all of us at Advent will have to get serious about doing what Christians have always done: making more Christians, using the gifts God has given us.

We'll learn more about spiritual gifts in our Lenten series this year, and I encourage you all to participate. Then I want to do a summer course to equip us with some more academic theological grounding as well as practical strategies for overcoming our own doubts and helping others to begin to receive the benefits of a relationship with God.

If these efforts are successful in bringing more newcomers to Advent, we can go on to create an inquirer's class combining fellowship, instruction, conversation, and experiential learning. If that is successful, we can add programming for children, and a more advanced class for adults.

I know I just used the words "if" and "want," and I have to apologize. It is taking me longer than I would like to make progress on my goals, like getting to know every family in the parish. I failed to anticipate how much of my first six months as your Rector would be taken up with administrative and personnel tasks. But it now appears that most of that work is done and, God willing, I'll be able to do more of what I have wanted to do all along. If you don't want to wait for me to get around to you, reach out to me, and I would be delighted to spend some quality time with you.

We're only going to accomplish any of this if we all decide to own this vision and take our parts in it. If I'm the only one at Advent who is committed to inviting people to know Christ here, it'll show, and the project will be over before it began. It's an increasingly secularized world that does not see the way Christians see, does not see the glory of God shining all around us, but remember what Jesus told Peter before telling him, "you *will* be catching people": "Do not be afraid." Where others see a problem, we can see the opportunity of a lifetime. Whether we see God at work in the world or not, God has already gone ahead of us. God is already touching people's lives. God is preparing a catch far more valuable than two boats' worth of fish, for every soul is invaluable to God.

*https://www.academia.edu/35395818/An_Estimate_of_the_Value_of_Two_Boatloads_of_Fish_As_Recorded_in_Luke_5_1_11