

## “Once Upon a Time”

I suppose that some preachers think the lectionary—that prescribed set of scripture readings for each occasion in the church year—is a relentless and unforgiving master. But I think the opposite: the lectionary is the perfect embodiment of forgiveness! Three years ago I preached on Luke’s story of Jesus calling his first disciples. I decided to take a very different approach with that sermon: to transpose the story into Keillorse and set it in Lake Wobegone on Super Bowl Sunday. This required significant utilization of literary license; but evidently mine had expired some time previously.

I’ll be honest about this—actually, I always try to be honest when I’m preaching so I don’t have to remember what I said—I loved that sermon. But I think I was pretty much the only one. I even got some rather pointed anonymous mail warning me never to try anything like that again. Well, thanks to the all-forgiving lectionary, I get another crack at it today... and we’re not going back to Lake Wobegone.<sup>1</sup>

I think I tried the story approach because there is a timeless quality to the way Luke approaches this tale. It begins, “Once...” which is almost like “Once upon a time...” This section of the gospel reads as though Luke is telling a series of stories (and remember that this gospel is addressed to Luke’s friend Theophilus)<sup>2</sup> to illustrate what Jesus was like. These are the kind of stories one might tell at a funeral, after the service is over, after the formal reception with the cookies, when folks have gathered at someone’s house, loosened their ties and taken off their shoes. “Jesus? He was so amazing! Why I remember one time...” And the story unfolds from there. Luke doesn’t just recount what Jesus did, but the *sort* of thing Jesus did... and the sort of thing Jesus still does.

So this story of calling disciples isn’t about how Jesus *was* so much as it is about how Jesus *is*. And the “Once upon a time...” of it could be any time, our time.

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<sup>1</sup> If, however, you would like to make that journey on your own, since the website posting has expired, E-mail me at [druhe@plymouthchurch.com](mailto:druhe@plymouthchurch.com). “Wobegone” on the subject line will get the job done.

<sup>2</sup> The gospel’s dedication can be found in Luke 1:1-4. Scholars are divided regarding whether Theophilus—whose Greek name means “Lover of God”—was an actual person or merely a representative name for all Gentiles receptive to hearing about Jesus the Jewish Messiah.

Matthew, Mark and John also have stories about Jesus calling disciples. And John also tells the story about the miraculous catch of fish, although in John it's way at the end, a post-resurrection story. Luke is the only one who puts together the fish and the fishermen. It makes for a great story.

Simon Peter, James and John have been fishing all night and they have caught nothing. They are tired, we may presume. They are frustrated. Perhaps they are just a bit anxious. Peter is supporting at least a wife and a mother-in-law.<sup>3</sup> James and John still live with their father Zebedee and contribute to the support of that household. Following their fruitless fishing, the fishermen are occupied with the thankless aftermath: cleaning up the boats, washing debris (but no fish) from their nets, preparing for the next outing which they hope will be better.

While they are occupied a crowd has gathered at the lakeside. Like so many in that region they are following Jesus because they are eager to hear the word of God from the new preacher. But they are a bit unruly. So eager are they to get close to Jesus that he has difficulty clearing a perimeter on the shore from which to address them. So he climbs into Peter's boat and asks Peter to put out a short distance from shore. These fishing boats were propelled by poles in the shallow water; so Peter poles them out and holds the boat steady as Jesus preaches.

We have no clue how Peter feels about this. Is he resentful? Excited? Attentive? Falling asleep? Fill in your own details here. We don't know how long Jesus speaks. But eventually the crowd begins to disperse, at last affording Peter the opportunity to finish up his work and get some sleep. It is then that Jesus tells him, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." We could get carried away, I suppose, with that image of Jesus calling us out into deep water. There's probably a sermon there; but let's not go there today.

Read the next part as you wish, but I think Peter is being sarcastic 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." Of course you know more about fishing than I do; I've only done this all my life! Whatever his mindset, Peter complies.

Chaos ensues. Immediately there are more fish than Peter's nets and boat can handle. He calls to James and John for help, and with the bulging

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<sup>3</sup> See 4:38-39.

nets straining between them, both boats nearly sink. These are big, open boats. As they pull in the nets, the boats begin to fill with fish, wriggling about in the sunlight. They are literally knee deep in fish, and more to come. The picture is completely crazy, unmanageable.

And then something snaps in Peter. He's been focused on the fish, hauling away to bring them in, struggling to keep his enterprise afloat there, when suddenly he realizes that the miracle isn't the fish. The real miracle is the presence of Jesus. Peter cannot ignore that he is in the presence of God. He cannot ignore that from this moment on his life will be different. Whatever is ahead, there is no going back. And Jesus hasn't said a word to him! In this account, Jesus never does say, "Follow me." It all happens inside Peter. He falls to his knees before Jesus and in the long and rich tradition of servants who are called by God he protests his unworthiness. "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." Remember Moses and the burning bush? "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?"<sup>4</sup> Remember Isaiah in the Temple? "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips..."<sup>5</sup> "Go away from me, Lord," says Peter, "for I am a sinful man." Whatever it is you have in mind here, you don't really want me to be a part of it.

In response to this confession, Jesus (in my imagination, at least) lifts Peter up. He says to him, "Do not be afraid." This is always the very first thing people who are in God's presence need to hear.<sup>6</sup> And then Jesus says, "From now on you will be catching people." I imagine him not only smiling, but laughing as he says this to Peter. Peter's life isn't going to be about fish any more.

At our staff Bible study on Tuesday, Matt said something memorable: that up to this moment, Peter thought that his problem was that he didn't have enough fish. Now it's a very different thing. With more fish than anyone could manage—like winning the lottery—he has realized that he has a much deeper, truer hunger at the very center of his life.

And then they all walk away. Jesus leaves with Peter, James and John. They simply leave their old lives behind: "When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him." We may be tempted

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<sup>4</sup> Exodus 3:11.

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 6:5.

<sup>6</sup> Shepherds surprised by angels need to hear it: "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people..." (Luke 2:10). The first visitors to the empty tomb on Easter morning need to hear it.

to fixate on what they leave behind; but they are focused on what lies ahead. Thank God they don't know everything that lies ahead. We never do. They step through a door, out of one life and into another, and nothing will ever be the same.

That's what it is like to be called by Jesus, "Once upon a time..."

But what about our time? What about this time? Does God still call us in the same way? I think so, absolutely Yes. But we have systematically trained ourselves to miss it when it comes, or to call it something else.

I can readily identify five or six call episodes in my life, and they are as different as they can be except that they follow a similar pattern. I see or sense something about the future with great clarity. This may have been coming on for a very, very long time; I may have sort of thought of it before, but suddenly it is crystal clear. Then I feel a sense of unworthiness and almost dread: I can't do that! I don't know how, I don't have the wisdom or the patience or the strength or the perseverance or whatever: everything screams NO! But I know it needs to happen, anyway. And I find myself on a new path.

In every one of these instances I can tell you where I was and what I was doing at the moment the light went on. It happened when I realized I had to admit that my first marriage was a mistake and get a divorce—something I could never have imagined doing. It happened in Omaha when I realized that my colleague Newell Davis was going to die and I wished to God I had stayed in Connecticut. Years later I was running up Happy Hollow Boulevard in Omaha when I suddenly stopped in my tracks with the realization that Plymouth Church in Des Moines was going to call me to succeed Jim Gilliom, whose shoes I did not feel worthy to shine. And years after that I was sitting at a stoplight on Grand Avenue when it was as though a voice were saying, "Ruhe, you're not the young guy any more. You need to start acting your age."

This happens all the time, and it doesn't just happen to me, it happens to you. You get to a place in life where there is no life. Something or other is not working and it may take nearly forever for us to admit it, but one day it's there... bam! We feel frightened. We feel unequal to the higher path we're called upon to tread, whatever it is. But the old thing isn't working any more because real life is over there. And it's time to step through the door.

This is an instance in which we need to let our theology catch up with our life experience; because while I'll wager that nearly everybody in the

room knows what I'm talking about with these moments of clarity and this summons to respond and step into something new, probably not so many of us see this as having anything to do with God. But the reality is that it has everything to do with God. The summons to a deeper, truer life is a summons to a deeper, truer vocation—not necessarily in the sense of the job we do but in the sense of the person we are. People tell me they met their life partner and they just knew! That when they found out about the pregnancy or got the call from the adoption agency they knew that their lives would never be the same. We see an injustice or a need and we find ourselves saying, "Somebody should do something about that!" And then we realize: "Wait a minute! *I'm* somebody!" We step through the door from one life into another.

Faithfulness means living our lives deeply, truly, honestly. It means responding to these occasions of call. It means paying attention. Frederick Buechner writes about this in a little paragraph that I think is so important that we included it in the hymnal, P-10.

Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.<sup>7</sup>

That's how Jesus calls us to follow him: in and through the very fabric of our lives, "Once upon a time..."

Amen

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<sup>7</sup> Buechner, Frederick, *Now and Then*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993.