

In the Presence of the Holy God
Luke 5:1-11
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 10, 2019

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

Our text, “When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.’ For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Last week, we heard that the crowds were astonished at Jesus’ word over the unclean spirits; this morning, we hear that the disciples were astonished (same Greek word) over the miraculous catch of fish. That equivalent response likely indicates we should pay attention to the similar theme/purpose of these occasions, shouldn’t we?

Is this text really about ‘Jesus the master fisherman’? Jesus’ miracles are not given to simply *wow*; they are given to teach and benefit with the Lord’s presence. There’s a teaching function (as well as tangible benefit) to the miracles we have in the Church today – baptism, the Holy Supper. They teach *and* they benefit. That’s what miracles do, so that we ought not just be amazed and say, “Why won’t Jesus do that miracle of fish-catching today?... that would be awesome to see!”, but rather we – in a sense – look past the externals of the miracle to the teaching and benefit they convey. We

don't just marvel that the water is poured over the head, but we 'listen further' to hear the meaning and tangible benefit, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." We don't just marvel that the bread and wine *are* the body and blood of Christ; we 'listen further' to hear the meaning and tangible benefit: "for you, for the forgiveness of your sins."

So, it *should* grab our attention that again in this morning's text those witnessing the miracles of Christ are "astonished." But that's not the only similarity between the text from last week and this morning. Recall last week, it was the demons about to be cast out who openly confessed "We know who you are, *the Holy One of God!*" They confessed the holiness of Christ, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God. Perhaps the crowds still didn't get it. And, in this morning's text, obviously the disciples still need a gentle reminder who this Jesus is, for they are not so thrilled at his request to take the boats back out where they had just – for an entire night – had no success fishing: "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing!"

Now, we ought not be too tough on Simon Peter, for he *does* honor Jesus' vocational authority – "At your word, I will let down the nets." He very easily *could* have said, "No way. Who's the expert here? *I'm* the seasoned fisherman, and you think you know better than I do how to catch fish?!" Sometimes, that's the pride with which we approach God's Word; we're willing to listen to it *until* we think it

encroaches a situation *we* know better: “*This* is what you say, Lord, about daily life in this fallen world? No way, I’m the expert here; I’ve lived with my difficult situations and faithfully borne my crosses for so many years! Your Word needs to take a back seat and let me show you how things work in the *real* world.” Our pride and desire to “be the expert” is not about to be humbled by giving Christ’s Word the place of honor.

So, we can learn from Peter, who at least honors Jesus’ vocational authority. But, obviously, it’s a different honor altogether when he witnesses the great catch of fish! Immediately, he falls down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”

This is the teaching moment, if you will, behind the miracle in this text, isn’t it? So, what are *we* supposed to learn? What does the Holy Spirit want to teach? That Jesus is a master fisherman? Doubt it. That Peter was sorry about not believing Jesus? Perhaps... but we see that many other times in the Gospels, without the miracle.

Or is the teaching of the miracle that this Jesus is exactly who the demons claimed to know he is: the Holy One of God. Notice Simon’s reaction: he’s not simply embarrassed for a *particular* sin; rather, he’s keenly aware of his sinful *nature*: “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man.” That, friends, is only a confession you make if you are aware that you are in the midst of the Holy God.

Sometimes, when we say to others “I’m a sinner,” we use it as an excuse. “Well, what do you expect; I’m a sinner.” If we are genuinely penitent, we’re usually focused on one sin by which we have harmed them: (for example) “I’m so sorry that I broke your dish.” But we admit the one sin rather than our sinful nature perhaps because subconsciously we know that – as fellow sinners – we’re on equal ground with each other *except* for this one sin; so let’s focus on the sin, repentance of it and forgiveness for it that will restore that ‘equal footing,’ if you will.

But, in the presence of the *holy* God, there’s no equal footing. You’re a sinner; He is holy. How much we American Christians have lost the awe and reverence for the Holy God that should cause us to quake in our shoes and fall before Him every time we come into his holy house! And, consider, when we *do* come into this holy house, that our distracted minds betray us and expose the fact that we do not hallow His Holy nature as we ought. The third commandment calls us to honor him by cherishing his word... and – the most surface level reading of that commandment implies, “at *very minimum*” on the holy day in the house of God, as he gathers you to hear His Word and dine with Him. And yet, even this, we treat as if we are doing him a great favor and He should be the one thankful for *our* presence: Imagine a father saying to his children, “You get six days a week to eat with whatever friends you want, but one day a week, we’re having a family meal”, and then, even when

the children keep the *minimal* spirit of the law, they are distracted at the table and clearly show by their body language that they would much rather be elsewhere or doing some other extracurriculars. But – if they *have* to be here, fine – they’ll slump in their chair and go through the motions, and the father should be so thankful for their presence!

Now, what father would not react with indignation toward children who so blatantly dishonor him and do not appreciate the opportunity to be eating at his table and in his presence!

How much moreso when the invitation comes from the *Holy* God to *unholy* sinners. Have we forgotten the Holiness of God, that it demands more than us paying lip service?... that it demands (not merely as a matter of *law*, but as a matter of awe) our humble adoration? Let us learn from Isaiah in our Old Testament reading, who upon seeing the scene of the throne room of God – the very scene in which we will join with the angels and archangels in a few moments – he cried out, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips (notice how he appeals not just to a particular sin, but to his entire unworthiness in the presence of the holy God).

Again in the Old Testament, there’s Manoah, the father of Samson, who – when told by the pre-incarnate Christ that he, Manoah, would have a son – Manoah offered a sacrifice, but then – in great fear – turned to his wife and said, “We shall surely die, for we have seen God.”

And then there's our Gospel reading, where Peter – realizing what the miracle taught – also realizes that he, a poor, miserable sinner has no place being in the presence of the Holy God.

Let us learn from Manoah, Isaiah, and Simon Peter – this should be our life's constant refrain... to be awestruck and astonished that we are in the presence of the Holy God each time He gathers us and teaches and feeds us... indeed, that we even carry His presence with us in daily life as our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and our foreheads and hearts bear His name He gave us in our baptism. That should drive us to holy fear in every time of temptation and every realization of our sinful nature.

And yet, what is the response to **Manoah**? His wife reminds him of this holy God's grace: "If he had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted the burnt offering or grain offering provided." And, to **Isaiah**, the same words of a clean conscience come from the angel, who declares his absolution: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away; your sin atoned for." And the same message of comfort is given to **Simon Peter** in the simple word of Jesus: "Do not be afraid."

That's the same message given to you by the glorious news of the sufficient burnt offering of Calvary Christ offered on your behalf, the blood of Christ that meritoriously and redemptively flowed from that cross now touching your lips takes away your guilt and gives you a clear conscience before God, knowing your sin is

atoned for; the same holy Christ calls to you, “Do not be afraid,” and teaches and gives to you anew the tangible benefits of his miracles in your presence.

When we are confronted with the holiness of God, when we contemplate that our sinful nature is not at all on equal footing with the holy God, but rather deserves to be condemned and sent away from him into the fires of eternal judgment... and then, as we begin to take our sin seriously, and as our conscience is weighed down by our knowledge of sin, and as we realize that the holy God searches and knows the heart and every dark corner in which we *think* we have hidden... then, what *sweet, sweet comfort* to hear the words of absolution, to taste the benefit of the Supper, to be pointed anew to our baptismal identity in that very holy Name of God, to be made certain anew that this Holy Jesus is the Christ – our savior, our high priest, our righteousness and salvation, and – in His Name – we are not known as sinner, but saint, free to come into the presence of the Holy God. Consider how St. Paul teaches this to the Corinthians: He first speaks of sinful *nature*: “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.” Notice, Paul is pointing not just to a particular sin, but identifying according to that sin the entire being of the unrighteous: Not just the sin of

idolatry, but ‘idolater;’ not just the sin of adultery, but ‘adulterer,’ not just the sin of stealing, but ‘thief.’ And, focusing on sinful nature, Paul then says, “And such *were* some of you.” By your own nature, that sin consumed you. But then, he continues, “But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” By Jesus you are no longer identified as sinner, but saint. The one formerly an adulterer, idolater, thief, homosexual, greedy... you may still struggle with the sins of adultery, idolatry, thief, homosexuality, greed... you may still struggle with all those sins, but they no longer define your being and nature. Now, you are in Christ. Now, you are saint. Now, you are free to stand with a clear and confident conscience before the holy God.

And, what’s more comfort, we have the words of the *end our text*. Notice, in both Isaiah’s case and in Simon’s case, the comfort afforded them in the presence of the Holy God all comes in the context of being sent to proclaim God’s Word and catch men (likewise in Manoh’s case, when he is gifted with a son who will rise up as Israel’s judge). This should be a solemn comfort for us that the Office of the Holy Ministry is an integral detail in God’s proclamation of forgiveness and the bestowal of a free conscience before God... that the Divine Service that would seem to be led by a sinner in a robe is not at led by him, but by the Holy and merciful God who charged him to serve in this capacity. And, in this holy charge of binding and loosing sins, so also is the binding and loosing of

consciences... so that, when you realize your sinful nature before the all-knowing holy God, you may hear with *your* ears and receive with *your* lips and watch with *your* eyes the Word and Sacrament, those mysteries of astonishment and wonder by which we have comfort of a clear conscience before God.

In just a few minutes, you have opportunity anew to cherish – with angel and archangel and all the company of heaven – to cherish being in the presence of the holy God and, thus, to laud his holy Name... not because that in and of itself is the pinnacle of the Divine Service, but because – grace upon grace! – He blesses us not only *in* his presence, but *with* his presence, the *holy* body and *precious* blood of Christ... for the forgiveness of sins, for a clear conscience before Him and therefore a strengthening of faith that eagerly confesses to all men the forgiven sinner's share in life everlasting.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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February 10, 2019