

January 24, 2021  
The Third Sunday after Epiphany  
Year B  
Mark 1:14-20  
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA  
Zoom Worship During the Coronavirus Pandemic  
Pastor Amanda Warner

## Fish Out of Water

When I was in college, I was a clown. I don't mean that I used to joke around a lot. I mean that I used to dress up in a clown costume and clown around. It's kind of an ironic thing. As many people are, I was afraid of clowns during my childhood, but when I got to college, I joined a performance ministry group called Acts 29.

I know that I've mentioned Acts 29 in sermons before; it was a huge part of my college experience. It's been a while since I've talked about it, though, so, just for a quick recap, Acts 29 was a group that used performance ministry to share the gospel. We used drama, music, testimonies, temple talks, puppets, and clowns and we went to churches and other organizations who asked us to come and perform programs from entertainment at community dinners, to Sunday School programs and rally days, to programs at hospitals and nursing homes, to children's sermons, to entire worship services.

When I joined Acts 29, one of the upperclassmen invited to teach me how to be a clown. So, I figured out a costume and a clown name, Rosie. I learned how to put on clown makeup and how to act like a clown. I figured out Rosie's clown persona and I actually had a great time being a clown. The clowns in Acts 29 were silent clowns, so we acted out everything that we were thinking or feeling whenever we were around people who weren't in our group. We had a lot of skits that we performed, often with the help of a non-clown narrator.

During the past week, in my spare time, I've been sorting through pictures and memorabilia from my college years, in the hopes of creating a scrapbook of those years sometime soon. While I was doing that, I found a skit that we wrote that's based on today's gospel reading. In it the clowns are invited by an unknown voice, who identifies as God, to go and fish for people. I vaguely remembered being in the skit long ago, when I was a clown, but it struck me as a I read through the handwritten notes on a page pulled out from a calendar, that we had played a little bit fast and loose with the story.

The clowns didn't do what Simon and Andrew, what James and John did when Jesus called them away from their boats, away from their nets, away from their businesses, away from their homes and families. The clowns were more reluctant, required more information. Exactly what was being asked of them? How would fishing for people work? Could they do it later? Could only one of them go while the other one kept things going at home? Ultimately the only thing that persuaded the clowns to go with God, to do what was being asked of them, was being told that God would go with them. Once they realized that they would not be going alone, or that it wouldn't even be just the two of them going, but that God would be with them, the clowns happily followed. It was a good clown skit, fun to perform and well received by the audiences who saw it, but like I said, it didn't quite follow the biblical story. The clowns, silent though they were, asked questions about what God truly wanted of them. Simon and Andrew, James and John just went.

What an amazing thing to think about. They were asked to follow, they were asked to fish for people, something that, if you give it any thought doesn't make much sense, and they did it. But, part of the power of the story is that they didn't give it a lot of thought. They didn't analyze what Jesus was asking of them. Unlike the clowns, they didn't ask for a detailed job description. They just went, without a moment's hesitation.

If you do take some time to think about it, though, it begs the question. What was Jesus asking them to in those enigmatic words, "I will make you fish for people."

If we were together in person, I would ask for a show of hands of how many people here have ever gone fishing. And then I would ask one of the brave souls who raised his or her hand, what happens when you fish for something. I might have heard answers like this: If you're line fishing, the answer is that you wait a long time and sometimes nothing happens. If you're net fishing, like the brothers and fishermen in the gospel were, you might not have such long waits between catches, but still, the gospels themselves tell us that there can be times when you still don't catch anything. In fact, after the resurrection the disciples go fishing and catch nothing all night.

Fishing, whether you use a net or a line, is a waiting game. But when you do catch something, whether on your line or in your net, there's a period of intense action. You haul the

fish to shore or into your boat and then, you have a choice. You either throw it back into the water, where, in theory, it swims away, or you decide to keep it and then, because it is deprived of the water that it can breathe, it dies. That's what fishing is. It is taking something out of the environment it is adapted to survive in and putting it into an environment that it can't survive in, usually, so that you can cook it and eat it.

That makes Jesus' invitation to Simon, Andrew, James, and John, to fish for people very strange indeed. For the fishermen pulling fish out of the water so that they would die and then cooking them and eating them was a matter of survival. But if fishing for people means pulling them out of the environment that they're used to surviving in and putting them in a new environment that they're not accustomed to, not adapted to, and cannot survive in, that seems to be a counter-productive exercise.

But is that really what Jesus was asking the brothers and friends to do when he told them that he would make them fish for people?

At our Confirmation class on Wednesday night, we talked about baptism. I told the kids that one of the things that the waters of baptism represent are waters that drown us. Every time we have a baptism at Emmanuel, I say these words as an introduction to the baptismal rite, "In baptism our gracious heavenly Father frees us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ."

One of the things that we believe happens in baptism is that we die and rise again to new life, a life that will continue into eternity when our earthly life is over. It is a death and a resurrection.

Another way of looking at it is that in baptism we are pulled out of the waters of sin, waters that we are adapted to live in, and brought to rest on a new shore. Of course, we are not adapted to live in this new land, on this new shore, but Jesus graciously breathes Holy Spirit life into us, so that we can live in a place that is not our natural habitat.

It is what Jesus promised, what his mission and ministry was always about. We hear about it in the beginning of today's gospel reading in Jesus' words, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand."

Of course, after a baptism, we're all still in the same place. The newly baptized person, his family, and Godparents, the congregation, the worship assistants, me, as the pastor; we haven't changed our physical location and everything still looks the same. But still, something has changed, the newly baptized person has experienced a crossing over, from death to life. The breath of the Spirit fills his lungs, he has been given new eyes to see, new stories to hear and tell, new light to shine. He has been given the capacity to live in the reign of God, which has drawn near.

But what is it, this new breathing space where the newly baptized person has been invited to live? Where is it, this new reign where all of us, the baptized people of God are told we now inhabit? What has drawn near?

Whatever it is, it is compelling. It is compelling, that good news promise of God drawing near. The person making the invitation to the kingdom of God, Jesus, was compelling enough for people, ordinary people, for Simon, Andrew, James, and John, to drop everything and follow.

And what does that mean for us? We, who have been given the lung capacity to breath Spirit filled air? We, whose eyes, which originally could only peer through the murky waters of sin, have been cleared so that we the shining hope of the reign of God? We, whose hands, which originally were trained only to grasp and grab and cling to what we call ours with what is quite literally a death grip, have been taught to open by Jesus' arms, by Jesus' hands, open to us on the cross. We who have been shown that the one of the signposts of the reign of God is giving freely and receiving gratefully?

The invitation to follow is there for us too. We know it, it we hear it, and sometimes we can do it. Sometimes we feel like we can jump up go, leaving everything behind, and embrace the transformation of our lives and the new world that God has made possible in us and for all of creation.

But sometimes it's harder. Sometimes our lungs ache for the simplicity of breathing the old waters of the sin. Sometimes our hands long to cling to things that don't give us life; to take what is not ours, to imagine that the more that we have, more privilege, more money, more things, will make us able to reign without God. Sometimes all our eyes can see is the brokenness

of this world, the pain of this world, the sin of this world, and we can find it hard to believe that there is another reality, that there is truly the good news of the reign that Jesus invites us into.

But still, Jesus finds us and invites us to follow, maybe not these days, by leaving our places, but by being fish out of water, breathing new air and seeing and seeking a world transformed into the good news of the Kingdom of God, which has come near! Thanks be to God! Amen.