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# The Call Story of Peter in Luke 5:1–11: New Vocation through Transformation

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## Luke 5:1–11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God,<sup>2</sup> he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets.<sup>3</sup> He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.<sup>4</sup> When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”<sup>5</sup> Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.”<sup>6</sup> When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break.<sup>7</sup> So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink.<sup>8</sup> But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”<sup>9</sup> For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken;<sup>10</sup> and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.”<sup>11</sup> When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him. (NRSV)

The call story in Luke 5:1–11 occurs at the Lake of Gennesaret, which has other names: the Sea of Galilee, and the Sea of Tiberias.<sup>1</sup> Usually, the lake is teeming with a variety of fish.<sup>2</sup> Jesus stayed in the fishing village of Capernaum during his public ministry and often traveled around the Sea of

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Galilee (Matt 15:29; Mark 7:31; John 6:1).<sup>3</sup> At or around this lake Jesus did many of his works. A lot of miracles were done in the neighborhood of the Sea of Galilee. In John 21:1–11, the risen Lord appears at this lake, called the Sea of Tiberias, and helps Peter and others to catch 153 fish. He then eats with them. At other times, Jesus calms the storm at the Sea of Galilee (Luke 8:22–24; Mark 4:35–41) and walks on the water (Mark 6:45–52; Matt 14:22–33; John 6:16–21). At still other times, he calls his disciples at the Sea of Galilee (Mark 1:17; Matt 4:19): “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

In Luke 5:1–11, the narrator does not explain why Jesus came to the Lake of Gennesaret or why he asked Peter to put the boat out into the deep water. To explore this text, readers must engage with the story of Peter’s call in 5:1–11, reading back and forth, and reading the whole narrative.<sup>4</sup> During the process of reading, we may ask the following reader-driven questions:

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3. About the fishing industry during Jesus’ time, see K. C. Hanson, “The Galilean Fishing Economy and the Jesus Tradition.” <http://www.kchanson.com/ARTICLES/fishing.html> (Accessed Nov. 13, 2019).

4. Yung Suk Kim, *How to Read the Gospels: An Introduction* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2024), 200.

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1. This article is based on my Bible Study Presentations at the Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church in 2019. My thanks go to the conference team, hundreds of attendees, and especially to Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi.

2. The lake is about 60 miles from Jerusalem and about 13 miles long and 8 miles wide. Its surface is about 700 feet below sea level, and it is about 150 feet deep at its lowest point. The Jordan River flows through it and provides some water supply.

- Why does Jesus stand beside the Lake of Gennesaret?
- Why does the crowd press in on him?
- What is the word of God that they want to hear?
- Why did Jesus choose Simon's boat from the two boats at the shore?
- What does he teach the crowd from the boat?
- Why does Jesus ask Peter to put out into the deep water and to let down his nets for a catch?
- What does the "deep water" symbolize?
- Peter says: "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." Why does he call Jesus "Master" (*epistates*, Teacher or Master)?
- Why is there an irony between the success of many fish and the resulting crisis that their nets began to break and their boats began to sink?
- Peter fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." Why does he fall down at Jesus' knees and say, "Go away from me"? Why does he say, "I am a sinner"? Why does he call Jesus "Lord"?
- Jesus answers: "Do not be afraid." What does Peter fear?
- What does "catching people" mean?
- What motivates Peter and his companions to leave everything and follow Jesus?
- Why do James and John, sons of Zebedee, also follow Jesus?

With the above questions in mind, we delve into the story of Peter's call in 5:1–11 and find chiasm in it.

- A Jesus' teaching of the crowds (5:1–3)
  - B Peter's fishing in the deep water (5:4–7)
    - C Peter responds to Jesus with fear and awe (5:8–10a)
      - B' Peter's new vocation (5:10b)
- A' Peter's following of Jesus, leaving his boat (5:11)

### Jesus' Teaching of the Crowds (A, 5:1–3)

Earlier in Luke's Gospel, the crowds heard the good news from John in the wilderness. Now they expect more from Jesus. Their thirst and hunger for the word of God were not resolved by John or on several occasions of Jesus' teaching. Because Jesus knew their hunger, he taught them the word of God from Peter's boat. Here, the word of God is "the good news of the kingdom of God" that Jesus proclaimed to usher in God's rule infused with justice and peace (Luke 4:43). This rule of God is different from Rome's rule, which is run by a patron-client system. To demonstrate God's rule, Jesus taught about it, cured the sick, and empowered the downtrodden. He traveled around the villages to proclaim this good news of God's reign (4:42–44). This good news does not

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come from human masters or kings. This good news says: Now is the time people may become a new creation. Now they are empowered to live a new life in the Spirit. They need freedom from ignorance about God and the Messiah. Now is the time they need freedom from all the enslaving conditions—from sickness, poverty, oppression, and all forms of slavery.

### Peter's Fishing in the Deep Water (B, 5:4–7)

After he teaches the crowds, Jesus asks Peter to put out into the deep water and lower the nets for a catch. This request is unusual since, upon finishing his teaching, we expect Jesus to return to shore so that he might continue to teach in other cities. But he wants to go to the deep water with Peter. Peter's initial response to him is negative: "Master (*epistates*), we have worked all night long but have caught nothing" (5:5). Calling Jesus *epistates* implies his understanding of Jesus as a master or teacher in the ordinary sense.<sup>5</sup> Then, he continues to say reluctantly: "Yet if you say so (literally, "but at your word"), I will let down the nets." Earlier, Peter saw Jesus healing his mother-in-law who had a high fever (Luke 4:38–39). Given this, Peter knew Jesus had power and probably trusted him as a great teacher (*epistates*). So, even Peter's reluctant response shows a bit of his faith because he acted anyway.<sup>6</sup> His saying "but at your word" (*epi de to rhemati sou*) signals that he would preserve his reputation even if it fails.

We wonder why Jesus wants to go to the deep water with Peter. First, Jesus knew that Peter failed to successfully fish in the deep water at night and that he caught nothing all night. So, Jesus wants to go to the same deep water where Peter failed the previous night to show him that success comes through faith. Second, Jesus teaches Peter that faith involves risks in the deep sea. Peter must face the harsh world of uncertainties and dangers where the lost desperately need salvation. Jesus wants Peter to prepare for a difficult mission in the deep sea—to seek out and save the lost. Third, while the deep sea may connote the dangers of mission in Luke 12:1–12, it also symbolizes Peter's old way of life with which he thinks he can control his life. In a deep sea, he cannot do anything other than rely on God with faith. In the end, Peter had

5. Peter addresses Jesus *kyrios* in Luke 5:8 when he is awakened from his old view of Jesus.

6. There are biblical motifs about the initial hesitation by prophets: Exodus 3:11; Isaiah 6:1–11; Jeremiah 1:6.

a miraculous catch of fish that led to the near sinking of the boat, which is an irony. Following Jesus involves crisis, risk, and success.

### **Peter Responds to Jesus with Fear and Awe (C, 5:8–10a)**

Peter feels he is nothing amid a sinking boat with a great catch of fish. He is so panic-stricken that he fears his death. In such a crisis, nothing is more important than saving his life. He realizes that his life is more important than fishing. This realization leads him to see Jesus differently, who is more than a teacher. He is the Lord (*kyrios*). He falls to his knees and says, “Go away from me, Lord (*kyrios*), for I am a sinful man.”<sup>7</sup> At this dramatic moment, he changes his view of self, Jesus, and the world. He thought he was the owner of his life, but now he sees his life as dependent on Jesus. Also, he thought he knew all about fishing and the surrounding conditions of the deep water. But he realizes now that he is nothing and confesses that he is a sinner.<sup>8</sup> He feels unworthy and unclean in the presence of Jesus. In this context, his “go away from me” is paradoxical because he should ask for salvation. What he means is: “I am not ready to deal with this situation. Help me.”

### **Peter’s New Vocation (B’, 5:10b)**

Then Jesus says to Simon: “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” “Don’t be afraid” does not mean there will be no fear in Peter’s life; it means he does not have to worry about it because catching people is God’s mission and because he will join this mission under the care of God. Peter receives a new vocation, prompted by his realization that he is nothing before the divine presence. His new vocation is to catch people. However, humans are not fish. Fishing or throwing nets is a metaphor for saving people, especially the lost—like tax collectors, sinners, and Gentiles.

Finding and saving the lost is a prominent theme of Luke. In the lost sheep parable, even one lost sheep needs restoration at all costs. In the parable of the Pharisee and Tax collector, a tax collector is evil and lost in society. But he prays to God: “Have mercy on me; I am a sinner.” He is found and saved. God’s mercy extends to anyone who returns to God. In the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, Lazarus is lost because of his economic hardships

7. There is a biblical motif that a person feels unworthy in the presence of the divine: Exodus 3:6; 33:20; Judges 6:22; 13:22; Isaiah 6:5; Luke 18:13. “Go away from me” in Luke 5 is different from other episodes in the Gospels where the disciples ask to be saved when they are terrified due to sudden windstorms. In Matt 14:22–34, when the boat of his disciples was in danger, Jesus comes, walking on the sea and saving them. Peter was so glad about his presence that he wishes to walk like Jesus. But Peter sinks and cries, “Lord, save me” (Matt 14:30). In another episode, Jesus was sleeping in a boat when the boat was swamped by the waves. His disciples wake him up and cry, “Lord, save us! We are perishing!” (Matt 8:25; c.f., Mark 4:35–41; Luke 8:22–25).

8. Yung Suk Kim, *A Transformative Reading of the Bible: Explorations of Holistic Human Transformation* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2013), 22–37.

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and poverty. He needs restoration from his lostness, but the rich man does not care for him. Upon dying, Lazarus is comforted by Abraham. In the parable of the father and two sons in Luke 15, the father throws his loving arms around his younger son, having patiently waited for him. When his son returns, he welcomes and accepts him because he found the lost son.

### **Peter’s Following of Jesus, Leaving His Boat (A’, 5:11)**

After Peter hears about his new vocation from Jesus, he and his companions return to shore. This move to the shore needs attention from us. We ask questions: What is the significance of Peter and his companions’ return to shore? What is “everything” that they leave behind? When they follow Jesus, do they know what that means? They came back to shore, bringing their boats back there. For them, the new mission place is not deep water anymore. It is in the land where the crowds live. Even if they had a great experience in deep water, their real mission work should happen in the world where the crowds wait for salvation.

In a similar way, the transfiguration scene in Luke 9:28–36 tells us of the importance of the mission in the world, not on the high mountain. On the mountain, Jesus prays, and his disciples see Jesus’ face changing, and Moses and Elijah talk with him in glory. Peter wants to stay there, saying: “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said” (Luke 9:33). But they do not understand what Jesus’ mission is. It is to save the lost in the world, not on the mountaintops.

Once Peter and his friends got to the shore, they left everything, which means their priorities changed. While Peter received a new vocation, he and his friends alike left everything and followed Jesus. One person’s response to Jesus triggers others to do the same thing. They embark on a new mission because of their experience with Jesus. So, they followed Jesus. Do they know what their following Jesus means or involves in the future? The answer is “not really”; nevertheless, they made up their minds. Their paths will be rough and dangerous. However, they made up their minds and left everything because of their assurance about the care of God.

### **Conclusion**

Luke writes to predominantly gentile Christians, and Jesus’ mis-

sion is well expressed in Luke 19:10: “For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” More distinctively than Mark or Matthew, Luke emphasizes God’s reign in the here and now (Luke 17:20–21).<sup>9</sup> For example, the angel of the Lord speaks to the shepherds in the field: “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day (*sēmeron*) in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:10–11). When Jesus reads the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth, he says: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). “Today” salvation reaches the house of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:9). And finally, a thief on the cross hears that he will be in paradise with Jesus “today” (Luke 23:43).

Given Luke’s emphasis on salvation and the mission for today, we can read the episode in Luke 5:1–11 not as a simple call story but as a complex story that weaves together teaching, a new vocation, transformation, and discipleship. It incorporates Jesus’ teaching of the crowds, Peter’s experience of a miraculous catch of fish, his confession, Jesus’ giving of a new vocation, and Peter’s following. This call story markedly differs from other call stories of Peter in other Gospel accounts. Here, Jesus meets Peter in the deep sea and helps him to understand the importance of life, salvation, and mission. Peter is called and given a special mission to catch people. But before his call, he has to go through a deep-sea experience. While he is amazed at the great catch of fish, he realizes that he is nothing and confesses his unworthiness: “Go away from me, Lord (*kyrios*), for I am a sinful man!” This realization makes him ready for the mission of saving the lost. He was once lost, but now he is made anew and committed to devoting his life to the great mission of the Lord, which is to seek out and save the lost (Luke 19:10).

The call story of Peter impacts us in our world today, as we bear witness to the love of God for a variety of people in today’s world. The story compels us to break away from our comfort zone and go out to the deep sea, trusting God and following the faith of Jesus. What we must avoid is not the deep sea but rather fear and an inflexible mind.

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9. See Troy Troftgruben, “Salvation ‘Today’ in Luke’s Gospel,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 45.4 (October 2018): 6–11. See also Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX* (AB 28; New York: Doubleday, 1970), 234.

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