**Sermon for January 22nd 2023 “Seaside Shadow-Shifters” Matthew 4:12-23**

*When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.*

I will say this…we are here in early Epiphany, the season of revealed light, and we have just had both a fun singalong and a piece of really *special* special music. If, given all those clues, you can’t quite work it out what the theme of this sermon will likely be, we’re gonna have to bundle you up and send you over to the Baptists. Because despite the obtuse title, there is no other direction our time this morning could possibly take than a nice, glowing, bathe-in-the-light of God’s-love kind of vibe. We will be talking today about the holy light that is already within us, reinforced and amplified by the choices we have made to welcome Jesus, the Light of the world, into our lives, and how that enriched light gets projected out into our world. It’s not quite as simple as that, though…because Matthew has yoked the story about those sitting in deep darkness having seen a great light to the story about the calling of the first disciples. Overall, the stories are absolutely about light, but there is a little seaside shadow-shifting where we need to talk about becoming fishers of people, too.

I am always glad that Jesus was so spontaneous and improvisational with his teaching methods…but even the most skilled improvisers sometimes get their lines tangled. It has been suggested that if these pairs of brothers, the first official disciples, had been *masons*, Jesus would have invited them to build the kingdom with him. If they had been *soldiers*, he would have encouraged them to fight for the right. As it was, though, they were fishermen, and we are left holding this metaphor of dubious value when it comes to inviting people into the presence of God and into relationship with Jesus. However we try to bring folks in, if we take this metaphor seriously, we have to contend with images of netting them, or hooking them, or somehow offering them bait that isn’t really what it looks like. The goal of a fisherman is a full boat; the goal of every pastor and church leader is a full church, but something, well, tastes fishy here. Surely, we have to find ways more honorable, more honest, less manipulative, less coercive, to populate the kingdom. Being fishers for people has its troubling aspects…until you consider what we *ought to be* using for bait.

In the world of actual fishing, there is a practice I would like to mention that deserves some consideration. Advocates of this style swear by it, both for comfort and effectiveness. Opponents of this style have a different view, suggesting that it is unsportsmanlike at least, and something akin to poaching at worst. What I am building up to here is the practice of fishing at night, under cover of darkness. But since it can be *really* dark out there, some lights need to be employed…and in fact, the more lights, the more fish, supposedly. You can buy floating lights and submersible lights and lures that are themselves lighted. And the idea is to draw out the minute plankton and little critters that the bait fish love to eat, and then the bait fish will come for a snack, and before you know it, the big fish show up for the free smorgasbord, and the people in the boats just scoop ‘em right out of the water! Those who love this talk about how peaceful it is, and how much cooler than during the blazing noontime heat. Those who hate it point to the rather obvious unfairness of artificially creating a feeding frenzy and then harvesting away. Interesting, huh?

In our metaphor, though, the imagery of night fishing can present some real problems for the compassionate Christian, the ethical Christian, or the Christian whose moral compass is functioning. Because, you see, luring people into relationship with God under false pretenses, false conditions, with false and inflated promises can *never work out well* for the duped, and creates a fragile notion of success and effectiveness in the dupers. Is it cooler, easier, less boats on the water, less nosy fish and game wardens about? Of course it is…but easier rarely equals better or more valuable or more authentic. It just equals more panicked fish in the boat.

In the early nineteen- nineties, I served a tiny church in southeastern Ohio, nine miles south of the Mason-Dixon line. We had about 130 folks on the books, and a big, big Sunday would net us eighty or eighty-five people. Across the river, in the sister town, was a big box church that was just bursting at the seams. And the bait they were using over there was the pastor hisownself: he was a well-known and rather notorious retired drug dealer and abuser in that county. And the story was, of course, that Jesus had set him straight, Jesus had turned his life around, and if Jesus can do it for me, he can do it for you, sister! Amen! Alleluia! But there was something fishy there, as I witnessed firsthand at a funeral I attended to support a friend whose father had died. This pastor was presiding, and as he entered, all natty-suited and hair slicked back, he knelt down in faux sympathy to comfort the widow, and inquired about the spiritual habits of her recently departed husband. She told him honestly that her husband, while not big on church, was kind and religious in his own fashion. And at that, this pastor looked around at the crowd, sighed a big sigh, and told her, well, since all these folks are here, I guess we should do the service anyway, but it really won’t matter, because your husband is roasting in hell as we speak. And then this paragon of virtue strode to the pulpit and conducted a service of such cloying sweetness that they should have provided little plastic- lined bags like the airlines do. And a few years later, when he ran away with the church secretary and absconded with thousands of dollars in church funds, folks around there were not all that surprised. He was a night fisher, he was, and his spiritual reality could not stand the revealing light of day.

So the first lesson I want us to take from this story, with a little help from the prophetic ones who forecast that the people who walked in darkness would see a great light, is that our fishing, however we engage it, must be in natural light. The faith we promote, the incentives we suggest, the promises and aspirations we make, must be the kind that will look good in the full sun. Evangelism under the cover of darkness just won’t do; there is more to all this than a full boat, it decidedly matters *how* you bring folks in. And the second lesson, I reckon, is a real fisherman’s lesson, and that is the plain truth that different fish require different bait or different methods to bring them into the boat. Some can be netted, but others must be landed with a line and the right bait, and still others patiently captured in your bare hands. And any church that has just one fishing method is doomed to miss a lot of fish. Despite what I just said, for that poor church nine miles south of the Mason-Dixon Line, the bait to get them all in the boat was the allegedly changed life of their night-fishing pastor. But I tell you the truth, as a confident preacher and robust church music leader, that the *only* bait that can really fill a church is Jesus, the Light of the World, the amplifier of our smaller lights. You can have the greatest preacher and a music program known across state lines and a Sunday School with thousands of kids, but if Jesus isn’t the star attraction, it’s all just vanity.

So how do we offer this indwelling light as the irresistible bait that everyone needs in their lives? We need to offer the same light, appeal to the same desire to come out of the shadows, but these offerings will take different forms. Those first disciples, two pairs of brothers, very different from each other in personality and needs, become the models for us to toss a wide net and be broad minded and broad in our methods for presenting our light to the world. First, we meet Peter and Andrew, brawny fellows who are slinging the net about in the blazing Galilean sun. But just a few moments later we encounter James and John, and their dad, Zebedee, who are done fishing for now, too durned hot, and are mending their nets. Think about it this way…the church isn’t even half an hour old, and there are two camps already, active and passive, dive right in and make good preparations, toss the nets or mend them first. I know they weren’t Methodists, but how interesting that the first disciples Jesus chose were a pair of action types and a pair of preparing types, the twin pillars of social action and personal piety already in place eighteen centuries before the guiding light we know as John Wesley would be born, squalling for air half a world away.

So, lesson one is that we present with honesty and authenticity, and don’t oversell the faith with claims that cannot withstand the light. Lesson two is that we need a full toolbox and bait bucket because it is a big, big ocean and different folks will need different versions of this light if they are going to turn around and swim among us for a while. And the third lesson, by no means the final, but enough for today, is that followers of this Jesus need to reclaim the things he did that made him a successful fisherman and shepherd. What does the text say, but that he went among that whole region, teaching and encouraging, uplifting and inspiring, and bringing healing and care to all he met. Those are the activities that fill our hearts, and fill the boat, too. For we, different as we are, all like good teaching, all like to be encouraged and uplifted, all like the healing that comes from compassionate listening and touch.

We are now, in our country, similar to those first pairs of disciples, with different ideas about how to proceed and live and be in the world. Some of us forecast smooth sailing ahead, and others, just a pebble toss down the same beach, see dark clouds on the horizon coming this way fast. And since on this lakeshore we will meet all sorts, maybe this reminder will help us all: a fisherman’s job is to fish, and a Christian’s job is to share the gracious loving light of God *as they understand it*. That’s it. When you don’t know what to say, don’t know what to think, don’t know what to do, the first tool to reach for should be encouragement, building each other up, and offering what healing we can. And the natural light that illumines that kind of life, the light of grace, is a truly irresistible thing. Let me prove it to you…I close with a true story that is barely 36 hours old. The characters in this story are a little Asian girl, maybe two years of age, and our own Christina Wong. We were all leaving the theater on the cruise ship, the little girl squalling and tired, well past her bedtime, and Christina, who was just glowing at the sight of that precious but discomforted child. And she did what any of us enlightened ones would do; she smiled at that little girl. The stern father and the obediently following mother didn’t catch this interaction, but they perceived their *daughter’s* reaction. The storm had passed, and that precious young’un was now smiling. Naturally, Christina smiled even more, and the little girl erupted into joyful giggles. *That* got the parent’s attention; the mother rushed forward in concern, and the father gave my spouse the stink-eye; what are you doing with my child? I do believe that the momentary bond between this little girl and Auntie Christina was so strong that had Ms. Wong extended her arms, that little girl would have leapt into them! This is a tailor -made, real-life illustration of the timeless truth we have been examining: that encouragement, and building each other up, and offering our own authentic light, these are truly irresistible things. We, left to ourselves, warts and crankiness and all, we will rarely if ever be irresistible. BUT, our *light*, informed and augmented by the Light of the World shining out of us? Absolutely irresistible. That light, that warmth, that authentic Jesus-infused self, that is the bait with which we can lure *anybody* out of the shadows. You wanna fill this boat? We have the tools and the techniques, friends. They are not mysterious or underhanded, manipulative, or coercive. We just need to let people see and feel the loving acceptance of God through us. Amen.