

“Being Earnest”

Pastor Sam Richards

26 March 2023 Fifth Sunday in Lent

Texts: Matthew 8:23-27; Mark 4:35-41 and Psalm 107:23-25

There’s a theory advanced to explain the paucity of fossil evidence related to early human existence and it goes like this: the reason is that early humans lived on the shoreline and their remains were, even if buried, would be swallowed up by the sea with bones and funeral artifacts (if any) pulverized and dispersed amongst that sand. This is intriguing, but apart from evidence, or witnesses to the claims, the hypothesis cannot be tested and either proved, or disproved. It is not falsifiable and hence not scientific.

There are two notable things about the fishermen Jesus recited as disciples: 1. their occupation and 2. their pre-evangelistic exposure to John the Baptist. They were earnest men, fervent in their hope of the messiah which, I suppose, made them seriously religious men. They were not drawn from the ranks of academia, nor were they participants in the religious orders (priests, Levites, scribes, administrative staff for the temple worship (managing the sacrificial flocks, the tax revenues, or the benevolence work in Jerusalem—they were not servants or trustees), and Pharisees Sadducees, Herodians or Zealots). There is so much that they were not, that we had best stay with what they primarily were: courageous, hard working fishermen possessed on a practical, earnest faith, a working faith. Thus they were a suitable pool of candidates for discipleship even while not being the typical candidates—such as the boys of well-placed families sought with teaching rabbis.

I wish to suggest that the maritime experience of many, if not most (we can tally up seven fishermen amongst the original twelve) of the disciples was definitive. They lived in a seacoast environment, and **went down**, as Psalm 107 alludes, **to do business on the sea. They have seen the works of the Lord, And His wonderful acts/wonders in the deep.** And, as it is written, God will not only work wonders in the sea: **And also My manservants and on My maidservants I will pour out my Spirit in those days. And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth . . . and it shall be that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.** (Joel 2:29-32)

Works on the earth’s surface, **works in the earth**, and **wonders in the deep . . . this** life experience uniquely equipped *commercial* fishermen (**those who do business on the sea**) for their *unanticipated* apostolic future. Jesus built upon their work/life experience as seafaring men: the risky, toilsome hard work of harvesting God’s bounty from the sea, quick, decisive and able to turn on a dime . . . these traits are coupled with the “business,” public, commercial dealings of fishermen. This in an elemental setting fraught with sudden and alarming dangers (rogue waves, sudden squalls and sea tempests). They shared sea saga’s of remarkable rescues (such as related in today’s texts!), living with seeming unpredictable weather and coping with real jeopardy. Fishing for a living, with its feast or famine; dearth and abundance, frustration and bonanza’s, added color, texture and stark reality to their human existence and Jesus, knowing that all this served as a rather excellent analogy for human life in general, recited heavily from this profession. He did not recruit from the religious professions, the academic, the arts of sports arena’s; nor from the building trades, carpenters, stone masons or laborers, nor civil service (there was one tax collector, no

farmers, no shepherds, or livestock handlers or vineyard dressers which produce agricultural products. He chose from fishermen, seasoned entrepreneurs—those who knew how to catch, market and trade in fish while living on the edge. The actual range of occupations was very broad, complex and diverse in Jesus' day. Jesus, who worked/lived as a carpenter, made preferential choices as to whom to recruit—as to whom would make the best *shepherds* of the church, ***of those rescued, or caught by them from the seas of life***: fishermen men of initiative, and drive, courageous—in touch with the elements and the God who ruled the earth, the wind and waves.

This background setting helps, I think, explain one of the gospels more difficult gospel sayings because fishermen dealt with violent circumstances regularly:

Matt. 11:11 Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen *anyone* greater than John the Baptist! Yet the one who is (less, or) least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. 12 From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven (is forcibly entered) suffers violence, and violent men (seize it for themselves) take it by force. 13 For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John.

Elliott comments: “The “violent” are men of eager, impetuous zeal, who grasp the kingdom of heaven—*i.e.*, its peace and pardon and blessedness—with as much eagerness as men would snatch and carry off, as their own, the spoil of a conquered city. Their new life is, in the prophet's language, “given them as a prey” ([Jeremiah 21:9](#); [Jeremiah 45:5](#)). There is no thought of hostile purpose in the words, “**violent men**” rather men of impetuous, eager zeal for the things of God, for the kingdom, for salvation are in view, not violent thugs and robbers! These fishermen fit that bill! Why else would they drop everything, and rise up to follow Jesus into the uncharted waters of His kingdom?! That deals with the **violent men** piece but what about the **kingdom of heaven sufferereth violence**?

In a special sense *violence* could mean “comes with force” or with power upon the souls of men *when it is attended with the demonstration of the Spirit* as alluded to in Joel 2—the prophecy declared to be fulfilled at Pentecost (Acts 2). That power/violence causes the soul dead to live—those lost in trespasses and sins, causing thereof to hear and the blind to see . . . melting stoney hearts, making enemies friends to God and Christ *and to one another*. *This liberating power sets free those in bondage to Satan, and those who are slaves and vassals of their own flesh and corruptions! **That is the effect of the kingdom of heaven upon those whose lives it touches!*** As John Gill writes: “In a word, in being the power of God unto salvation, to many souls: and which was further seen, in the manner it did all this; suddenly, secretly, powerfully, and effectually, and yet not against the wills of men; and by such instruments as the apostles were, poor, sinful, mortal men; despised by the world, and attended with opposition and persecution.” (Gill's [Exposition](#)) Fishermen were real men living real lives and these men, due to the coming of Christ into their lives, now lived on a higher plane. They worked hard productive lives—hard physical labor is honorable.

John Gill proceeds to expand on our understanding of *violence* here. “**And the violent take it by force**; meaning either publicans, and harlots, and Gentile sinners; who might be thought to be a sort of intruders: or rather the same persons, as being powerfully wrought upon under the ministry of the Gospel; who were under violent apprehensions of wrath and vengeance, of their lost and undone state and condition by nature; were violently in love with Christ, and eagerly desirous of salvation by him, and communion with him; and *had their affections set upon the things of another world*: these having the Gospel preached to them, which is a declaration of God's love to sinners, a proclamation of peace and pardon, and a publication of righteousness and life by Christ, they greedily caught (or, grab) at it, and embraced it.” (John Gill, Exposition) This is the import and the impact of the gospel of Jesus Christ!

So, the Easter message, heard from a swamped fishing vessel in the midst of a storm pictures this: ***life is dangerous and filled with the perils— inherent in life itself.*** Courage, hard work, skills and business sense are survival skills—like them we are compelled to put ourselves out there *as strongly as we can*, with eagerness and zeal—fervor!—like the pilgrims flocking to Ashbury University! Know this: when we are tested, threatened and storm tossed as we either are, have been, or will be, we have, in Jesus, a powerful Redeemer who walks toward us in the turbulence—and says to our **winds and billows**, “**Peace. Be still.**” Jesus can rest with peace because He knows that nothing is outside the Father’s will, or control. And that security is obtained only through faith in the One who declared it to be so. If God intends to save both ship and sailors, then giving up and abandoning ship is a very poor option! We only have to cry out. Jesus does the rest. ***Listen, I invite you to consider how much of Easter is all about Him and all about our benefit from His toils and work!***

Amen