I can hear Simon Peter harrumphing:
Who is this Jesus fellow? What does he know about fishing? He is a rabbi.
He knows a lot about scripture, but fishing?

Last week, we heard in the Gospel of Luke how Jesus really upsets the powerful elders in his hometown with his interpretation of Scripture, and then flees for his life.

Today we hear how Jesus retreats from all the attention he is getting. But soon the crowds catch up to him in a fishing village at the Sea of Galilee, or as it is called in Luke, the “lake of Gennesaret.”

Jesus is cornered by the crowds on a beach. Just then, a fisherman, Simon Peter, also known as Cephas, and his fishing partners, the brothers James and John, are coming ashore in their boat after an exhausting night of fishing with nothing to show for it.

They’ve been hauling nets and rowing their boats all night long. They are tired, dirty, frustrated and ready to pack it in.

When they come ashore, there’s a lot of commotion on their beach, and they can hardly get their boats out of the water.

Then this rabble-rousing rabbi, Jesus, who they’ve heard way too much about, is standing there, and has the nerve to ask if he can borrow a boat and use it as a platform for a few impromptu teaching moments for the crowds.

Well, why not? We aren’t catching a thing, and the boat isn’t going anywhere anyway. Go ahead, rabbi, use the boat while we wash out our nets.

Peter goes about cleaning his gear, but he is listening out of one ear as Jesus teaches.

Jesus tells entertaining parables about cultivating faith in good soil, not in the pebbles like those on the beach.

Some of his stories are even funny as he mocks the high-and-mighty.

And as Peter listens, Jesus tells crowds they are loved by God just as they are, and how to cultivate the goodness and holiness that is already within each of them.

Peter has never heard a rabbi talk like this.

Just then, Jesus turns his attention to Peter.

“Let’s go fishing.”

“What?”
“Let’s go fishing. I will show you how to catch more fish than you can possibly imagine.”
Yeah, right. Peter now knows Jesus is clueless.
“I’ve been fishing all my life, I know how to fish, but if you say so, I’ll play along. Let’s go.”
So off they go. Of course, when Peter hauls in his nets, they are bursting with fish.
The miracle isn’t just the fish in the net. The miracle is that Simon Peter listens to Jesus and gives it a try despite himself.
This story is deeply, deeply embedded in the memories of the earliest Christians, and for a reason.
The story we hear today is told in all four gospels of the New Testament. Yet, each gospel gives this story a slightly different twist.
In the Gospel of John’s version\(^1\), Jesus tells Peter to fish on the other side of the boat. Put your nets over here, Jesus tells Peter, not the usual place where you put your nets.
Fish on the other side of the boat.
The nets burst to overflowing when Peter does something different. Fish on the other side of the boat.
God’s abundance is everywhere. But you need to do things differently to find it. Fish on the other side of the boat.
In Matthew’s and Mark’s version\(^2\), Jesus tells Peter to follow him and he will show them how to “fish for people,” or in the old King James Elizabethan language, “I will make you fishers of men.”
In Matthew and Mark, the emphasis is on netting new disciples, and building what will become the church.
But Luke’s version has a different phrase.
Instead of saying “fish” for people, Luke quotes Jesus saying, “from now on you will be catching people.”
That may sound like a minor difference in English, but the New Testament was written in Greek. After reading this, I was curious about the word change. So, I looked it up, and there is a wonderfully significant difference in Greek between the two phrases.
In Luke, the Greek word for “catch” is ζωγραφέω, which means “catching alive.” The emphasis is on the word “alive.” It is not about hauling in fish or people. The emphasis is bringing life to people.
The phrase could be translated this way: “From now on, you will find people and bring people alive.”
This is, in fact, the underlying message of the Gospel of Luke.
Jesus’s mission is not just about gathering followers and building an institution for its own sake.

Jesus’s mission is to bring life out to people, wherever they are. No hooks, no nets, no catches, no exceptions, no matter who people are, where they live or what they do. Bring life to people. Give people life.

“Follow me,” Jesus is saying, “and together we will find the weary and the lost and the suffering, and we will bring people alive.”

This is the very reason why Jesus comes to earth, and ultimately why he goes to the Cross – to show us there is more to life than death.

And he beckons us to join him in this task in bringing people alive, wherever they are. This is our mission. This is why we are here, and what makes us church.

And it all starts here, on this one day, long ago, on a beach in Galilee, Peter understood his life in a way he had never understood it before, and not just because he catches a bunch of fish.

Peter experiences the Holy touching him to his very core, bringing him alive. He sees what always has been in front of him. He comes alive in a way he has never felt before.

But to see this, to experience this, Peter had to set aside his jaded, snarky knows-everything self. He had to do something different – he had to fish on the other side of the boat.

Peter puts down his nets for good, and his life is never the same again.

The story we hear today continues. Peter and Jesus will walk together, share many meals, talk a lot, pray a lot, and argue a lot – and bring people alive.

Peter will be there in Jerusalem when Jesus is arrested, and Peter will be there at his death, at his tomb, and beyond.

It will be Peter, with all his flaws, who will be the one to hold together the early disciples of the Risen Christ. Upon Peter’s shoulders the church will form.

And it all starts here, on a pebbly beach on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, where Peter encounters Rabbi Jesus and experiences the holy within himself – and learns that sometimes you have to fish on the other side of the boat. AMEN

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1 John 21:6
2 Matthew 4:19, Mark 1:17