

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C
Nate Irvine, Young Adult & Campus Minister
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
February 9, 2025

Hands down, the best decision I ever made in college was to study abroad. More specifically, I had the opportunity to travel to Costa Rica. I lived with a Costa Rican host family, took Spanish as a second language, was immersed in the culture for a bit, and all of that is on top of the whole point of the semester: All of us were there to study faith and politics from the Latin American perspective, studying ideas like liberation theology, and taking study trips to Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Cuba. The semester abroad widened and expanded my faith in ways that still informs who I am today.

So important to me was this experience that, fast-forward just a shade under 7 years, after Danielle and I had met and married, Danielle had just graduated from optometry school, so we decided to go to Costa Rica together. Now, this trip was purely a vacation and celebratory in nature, so we signed up for a few excursions, one of which was waterfall rappelling.

Now, just to make sure we all have the same mental image, waterfall rappelling is where you wear a harness, and you're hooked into someone at the top of a waterfall, and you rappel backwards down the waterfall.

And the way our excursion worked, they start you off small, with basically a babbling brook with a three foot drop, just to get used to the equipment and the mechanics of it all, and after you do a handful of these with increasingly higher waterfalls, you get to the final waterfall. I'd say at this point, Danielle and I were feeling quite confident and having a great time.

But all of that was about to change pretty quickly.

We arrived at our final waterfall, and this happened to be a legit waterfall. I can't remember exactly how high it was, but 15-16 stories has been what's always stuck in my mind, or roughly 170 feet. In either case, we knew it was a legit waterfall because when we stood at the top of it, and attempted to look down, we couldn't see the base because it was a straight drop.

As we're waiting for our turn to go, a woman had harnessed in, and had started to rappel, and almost immediately it seemed she started screaming. At first this felt pretty normal given the activity, but she just kept on screaming. And keep in mind that we can't see a thing, but can only hear these blood curdling cries. And I think most people are starting to get a bit anxious at the idea of going down at this point, when all of sudden, the screaming stops. And, like you right now, we *really* wanted to know why. Apparently, she fainted. Right there in the harness, on the line, in the middle a waterfall. Naturally, a bunch of the waiting rappellers decide this is not for them, and bail.

Now, I have to admit, I was the one in our little duo that wanted to take off. I became really unsure that this was a good idea, and was perfectly content joining much of our group who took the foot bridge to the base camp. But not Danielle. She was resolute that we should stay and try it for ourselves. And I have to be honest that if she was willing to forgo going backwards over a wet cliff herself, I'm fairly certain we would have walked away. But because she said so, we stayed, and we repelled down, fully conscious, and having a great time, too, I might add. I was ready to bail, but because Danielle encouraged us to stay and try it out, I changed my mind.

I think something similar is happening between Simon Peter and Jesus in the Sea of Galilee in our Gospel reading today.

The gospel writer Luke sets a compelling scene. First, we're met with Jesus standing beside the sea, with a crowd of people wanting to hear Jesus preach the word of God so badly, they're literally pressing in on Jesus and not giving him enough space. They are desperate to hear what he has to say. Meanwhile, Peter is on the shore after a long night of backbreaking and strenuous, but ultimately fruitless, labor. And he's on the shore cleaning his nets with the other fisherman. And while he's cleaning his nets, Jesus asks him if he wouldn't mind letting him use his boat in order to get a little distance from the eager crowd. Peter seems completely fine with this, and unbothered by the request, obliges. And they put out from the shore, and Jesus teaches, the contents of which we aren't told. It's secondary to what's about to happen.

As the people are filing out from the beach to go home, Jesus turns to Peter, and asks Peter to do something kind of strange: he tells Peter to try fishing once more.

And I think it's interesting to attempt to slow this down to real time, and try to piece together what Peter might have been thinking and feeling in this moment. On the one hand, we can almost see Peter with a perhaps irritated knee-jerk reaction to Jesus' idea here. Yes, he keeps it respectful by calling Jesus "Master", but he says, "Look, we were out here all night and caught nothing." He begins to offer, quite honestly, perfectly legitimate reasons for why this a bad idea and waste of time and energy. But it's almost as if we can see Peter mid-reasoning that we see him, for some reason, start to turn just ever so slightly.

And part of that has to be because of something that we haven't read in our set of Sunday readings so far in our time with Luke's Gospel. See, earlier in chapter 4, Jesus had met Peter previously. He went to his house, where his mother-in-law was sick with a bad fever, and Peter saw him not only heal her, but then saw the response from the community. Watch this - *as the sun was setting* - loads of people began to bring their sick to Jesus, and he heals them and ministers to them until when? *Until daybreak*. And see, part of the really interesting thing that Luke shows us here, are two parallel stories. Where Jesus has worked all night, fishing for people, preaching about the good news of the Kingdom. Bringing healing and liberation. And he immediately contrasts that with a story of Peter toiling all night, but catching nothing. It's beautiful. And Peter's about to be called into something radically different than pulling up empty nets.

But I digress. Peter has all of this with his mother-in-law and the community swirling around in his heart and mind that while he's in the middle of telling Jesus why he's wrong, he shifts, and says these profound words:

Yet if you say so.

Remember, Peter doesn't know much about Jesus yet. As far as we can tell from Luke, this is maybe his only second time meeting the guy. Just a handful of experiences here. But there's this part of him, somewhere, that's beginning to maybe realize that Jesus is trustworthy. That Jesus is reliable. That he means what he says. That if he asks us to live a certain way, maybe he knows what he's talking about. And this idea is going to come back to us in the end.

And so, maybe despite his better judgement, he agrees. And we know the story - they haul in so much fish, that he has to call in a second boat, and as they're hauling in the catch, both boats start to sink. Because listening to Jesus makes a difference!

And on the one hand, I'm so grateful to Jesus that he calls someone like Peter, who barely knows who Jesus is at this point. Remember, it's not for quite some time that Peter finally pieces together that Jesus is the Messiah, and even when he does, he has no clue what being the Messiah actually entails, nor what it means for someone to follow that Messiah. But that doesn't matter to Jesus at this point. He's willing to meet people exactly where they are. And I'm so glad this is the life of faith.

But I'm also grateful for Peter's yes here. That he was willing to put the little that he did know about Jesus into practice.

And what of this fishing for people? What does it mean for us to cast our nets? What does it mean to try to follow Jesus' example of preaching the good news of God's reign of hope and liberation for all mean for us today? Well, the good news is we don't have to look very far.

We can look at Jesus' own words from just a chapter previous when he said:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And here's where that trustworthy bit comes back into play. St. Mark's, in the days and weeks and months ahead, may we receive Jesus' words to Peter as a promise: Do not be afraid. You *will* fish for people.

Amen.