

February 6, 2022 - Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

“Caught Up in the Net of the Cosmic Christ” - Rev. Seth D Jones ©

Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11

Today’s story shows up in different forms in all four Gospels (Lk 5:1-11, Mt 4:18-22, Mk 1:16-20, Jn 21:2-12). There is something important about what Jesus is saying here, that the disciples, and therefore we, will be “fishers of people”. I want to suggest today that we do not focus on the disciples and how to fish, nor on the number of fish, nor on techniques of evangelism, but that we focus instead on the net itself.

God reaches into the deepest corners of the world and catches everything up in God’s deeply woven love of all living things, which includes you and I. From the very beginnings, God casts out wide and far a shimmering, vast, gossamer net for those who so choose to be caught up in it. Sometimes, the creatures of creation swim deeper, leaving the net and any possibility of getting tangled in the struggles of love, grace, freedom.

Sometimes, those struggles tear the great net and we need to sit with others to mend the net, as the future disciples are doing in Mark’s Gospel. Sometimes, hopefully, we make the counterintuitive move and turn to swim right into God’s shimmering net of grace.

There is an incredible image from the Mahayana Buddhist tradition which speaks to the net of Christ. Within Mahayana Buddhism is a kind of God of gods. That God’s name is Indra. If humans worship demi-gods, and demi-gods worship particular gods, then those gods worship the god of gods, who is Indra.

Indra lives in a vast palace and you know the palace is nearby when you see what covers the palace. What covers Indra’s palace is a vast, shimmering net called Indra’s Net. As you look at Indra’s net, you begin to see that at the intersection of each string is a glittering, shimmering multidimensional jewel, all of them different colors and some of them colors beyond the spectrum of our capacity to see. As you look closer, you realize that Indra’s net is a vast matrix or network that everything in the universe is built upon and dependent upon.

Indra’s net is the infinite scaffolding of creation itself, the interrelationship of all things to one another, even as their individual light shines forth at the intersection of those relationships.

St. Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, and Hildegard of Bingen saw something like Indra's net in their ESEs, which framed the rest of their lives. The Western and Christian philosophical phrase for this image is "contingent creation", meaning everything depends on everything, and in order to come into creation and exist at all, all things depend upon God and Christ for their very existence. Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson (born in EC, WI!!) puts it very clearly in this way:

The contingency of the universe is contingent upon Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection.

As we talk about fishing with Jesus, remember Indra's net. One day, Jesus saw some fishermen washing their nets. Jesus asked Simon, who will become Peter, to take him out into the water along the shore so he could teach the large crowd from the boat. After teaching for a while, Jesus turned to Peter and said, "Let's go into deeper water and let down the nets for a catch." Peter had been fishing all night and caught nothing and told Jesus this very thing. Peter threw out the nets and so many fish were caught that the nets began to tear and the boats began to sink. The other fishermen who saw this, James and John and whoever else was on the boat with Peter, saw this and "were amazed". Jesus, with the words of the angels throughout Scripture, says, "Do not be afraid. From now on you will be catching people." Our Gospel story then states:

When they brought their boats back to shore, the fishermen left everything and followed Jesus.

Fishing on Galilee was almost always with nets. The nets had floats on one end and weights on the other, and the nets would be thrown into the water with a well-practiced, elegant toss that spread the net out. Jesus' call to "Follow me" sounds like a command, but it is more appropriate to think of Jesus inviting, not commanding the brothers. "Come along with me", he says, "and I will make you fishers for people".

Pay attention to the language here. Jesus invites and then tells the brothers **he** will make them fishers for people. Jesus does the work here. But even more so, listen to how the brothers respond. Our reading says, *they left everything and followed him.*

There is no reasoning from Jesus. There is no preaching or persuasive language by Jesus. There is no Jesus 101 class. There is no deliberation or questions asked. Something about Jesus and his invitation, convinced Simon Peter, James, and John to immediately follow Jesus. This is quite a net that Jesus is casting. The fishermen are now caught up in the net of Christ rather than catching fish into their fishing nets.

Let's take a moment and think about fish. Fish are pretty savvy. They know their environment. It is why for centuries fishing, especially fly-fishing, has been considered by many philosophers to be a spiritual art form and act. When I was learning to fly-fish

in Montana, I was told by those who tried desperately to teach me to fly-fish to *think like a fish*. Fishing, at least in the ancient world and with a pole and hook and bait, is an act of prediction, intuition and a continually increasing knowledge of the environment of the fish one is trying to catch. We are not talking about modern commercial fishing here at all.

So if you are a fish and you see the net drop, you swim the other direction, or deeper. Most likely, you will be following a school of fish, so you are at the mercy of the group and the weird shared mind of the school. If a net fisherman is very good they can predict the direction of the school and throw the net to catch up a whole school. Fish are followers. Fish are instinctual creatures. Fish do not want to be caught up in a net.

If you are a fish and you get caught up in the net, all your struggles to get out of the net get you hung up more deeply into the net. Then, after you have struggled yourself into exhaustion, you feel yourself moving through the water again, but this time it is not of your own will or volition. The net becomes a boundary between the open water and an unknown, painful future.

The world gets brighter as you get closer to the surface. The water gets warmer. And then the thing you breathe to survive disappears. You are yanked up into a new world, one that looks completely and utterly different from the one you were swimming in. This new world is incredibly bright. There are colors you have never seen, that cannot be named based on the spectrum of colors you know. It might even be beautiful. But, and this is the most important part, you can't breathe. Your skin burns. Sound collapses in a weird way. You know, beyond all comprehension, that you are dying.

I am anthropomorphizing wildly here. I have no idea how fish think. But I imagine the world-change for the fish is extreme. Fish have intelligence, as all living things do, and recently a French company which was the primary seller of fish bowls in France, quit making fish bowls. The reason is because fish go mad and die early in fish bowls. Because the bowl is circular, the fish cannot orient in space properly. And they are often alone. Fish need other fish, in the same way people need other people. And so, rather than trying to educate their clientele on the abusiveness of fish bowls, they just quit making them. Now they only sell large size aquariums and fish in at least pairs or more. Understanding fish means we understand how things live better, and understanding how creatures live, means we also understand ourselves better. It appears Jesus had a good understanding of living creatures, both fish and human.

But we were talking about the radical change in reality and environment that happens when fish are caught up in a net. The big difference between a fish caught in a net and whatever it is Jesus is catching us up in is that you and I are not fish. We are not just creatures of instinct and reaction. We have other options when we sense the presence of

the net. One of the options we have is to *choose to swim into the net*. This is what Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John do. They swim right into the Jesus net. Jesus casts the infinite and shimmering net of God, Indra's net, if you will, and the new disciples see the world both for what it is and what it could be and swim into Jesus' net. They choose, without even thinking about it, to get all caught up in the messy world-altering revelation of God.

Once that deep, shimmering structure of the universe is seen, it cannot be unseen. And once we swim into that net, we are now intimate and essential participants in the continued revealing of the light. We realize, without even really thinking about it or being persuaded, that we are completely dependent on the things of God.

This is why we need to reverse how we think about becoming *fishers of people*. We are made into *fishers of people* by Jesus. Remember, he says, *I will make you fishers of people*. We are formed by the light, by the net, that Jesus has caught us up in. Perhaps, what is revealed to Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John, and us, is that we are already caught up in the net. We are freed from the nets of this world and recognize that our true home is with God, the shimmering net of love.

For us, like the fish, the net becomes a boundary. But the difference is that we know, no matter what, we all are caught up in some net. There are so many nets to get caught up in this world, aren't there? The net of politics is the one so many of us are caught in these days. The net of the pandemic is another net we are caught up in. We think, If only I can free myself from the net. But the problem with fishing nets is that, the more we try to slither our way out of that net, the more caught we become. The more we try to fight free of the intractable problems we face as a country and world right now, the worse the problems get.

What is your net, that thing that the more you struggle to get out of, the deeper into it you get? What boundary does the net you are caught in represent?

Many of these nets that we are caught up in, we have very little choice to be hung up in them. Upbringing, social circumstances, health, work, the people around us - there is not much we can do about some of these things. In many of those nets, very little is revealed except the fact that you are caught up in a net. The nets we are caught up in represent vast boundaries. Perhaps the net you are in is the boundary between the temporal, the present situation, and the eternal, that which is always true. Or perhaps it is between bodily, material concerns which overwhelm your spiritual desires. Maybe the net is between the apathy the modern world forces upon us and the love you want to share and give. Or perhaps the net is catching you up in the very present struggle between compassion and hate. Regardless, the net is a boundary marker.

Author Richard Beck, in his book *The Slavery of Death*, describes how caught up in the world's net we can be:

Corporations and nations and other demonic powers restrict, control, and consume human life in order to sustain and extend and prosper their own survival...The principalities have great resilience; the death game which they play continues, adapting its means of dominating human beings to the sole morality which governs all demonic powers so long as they exist - survival...(William Stringfellow)

The powers, like all of us, are terrified of dying. They pretend to offer us life, or at least that we will be remembered - some significance - but the neurotic pursuit of self-esteem via service to the powers is revealed to be another manifestation of our slavery to the fear of death.¹

It seems to me, in times like this, when the problems are so vast and the net we are caught in is so tight, that we should be looking for the shimmering light of Jesus' net in those situations. If we keep trying to resolve the situation without Christ, well, we will just get hung up deeper into the nets of the world.

Our commitments to the world are why it can really hurt to choose to swim into the net that Jesus has cast. By choosing not to escape, but instead by choosing to swim straight into the Jesus net, we get yanked up into a new world, a world where we begin to catch a glimpse of the bejeweled net that shimmers in all things that is also called the Kingdom of God. In seeing that vast net of Christ, we may feel like we can't breathe the new air, like a fish being pulled from the water, or like a person being yanked up out of the waters of baptism. It is a death, of sorts. Unlike the fish, though, we are able to, metaphorically speaking, breathe both underwater and also on land. We are able to live in different worlds at the same time. We are able, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to live within the boundary the net represents.

Against all intuition and all the engrained, evolutionary survival techniques we have acquired throughout the eons, we, like the disciples, have chosen to swim into the struggle, to swim into the net. We know that, as long as we are inhabitants on this planet, we are caught up in the net of Christ. We know that it is in this strange boundary between what was and what will be, on every level, we live in the thrashing, fighting, desperate struggle happening right here in the net. Throughout the ages, throughout pandemics and wars and disasters man-made and natural, the follower of Christ is the

¹ Beck, Richard. *The Slavery of Death*. pg 54. Quote found at *One Man's Web: Gasping for Air in the Kingdom*. <https://onemansweb.org/gasping-for-air-in-the-kingdom-matthew-412-23.html>

one who stays in the net and shares the calming, compassionate love of God and Christ with our fellow school of fish, human beings and living things alike.

Casting the vast net of shimmering love, Jesus invites us to swim straight into that net and get hung up in all the things of God. It is right there in the net that we begin to realize there is a way to at once be with God and be with one another in this world, to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus has cast the vast bejeweled net across the world and we are invited to shine like the multidimensional jewels at the intersection of the strings of the net. Let us all swim into the Jesus net.

Amen.