

**Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 10, 2019**  
**Solemn Mass**

**By the Reverend Stephen Gerth**

*Year C: Judges 6:11–24\*; Psalm 85:7–13; 1 Corinthians 15:1–11; Luke 5:1–11*

On the past two Sundays we have heard the story of Jesus' attempted ministry in the synagogue at Nazareth, where he had grown up and where he and his family were known.<sup>1</sup> At first, the people who heard him were astonished at his teaching in a good way, but that changed when they remembered who they thought he was: "Joseph's son."<sup>2</sup> The evangelist tells us the people then tried to throw him off the brow of a hill. Instead, Jesus made his way to Capernaum on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, which Luke alone in the New Testament calls by another of its names, the Lake of Gennesaret. There Jesus heals by casting out demons who know who he is.<sup>3</sup> And there in Simon's house, he heals Simons' mother-in-law by rebuking a fever.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike the people in Nazareth, the people in Capernaum, a fishing village, want him to stay. But he

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 4:14–30. Biblical references are from the RSV unless noted.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 4:22.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 4:32–37, 40–41.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 4:38–39.

tells them, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose.”<sup>5</sup> Yet he doesn’t get very far.

As today’s gospel lesson begins, Jesus is by the shore of the lake. Simon and others have fished all night and have now come to shore to mend their nets. Jesus gets into Simon’s boat to teach the crowd that had come to hear the word of God. The late New Testament scholar François Bovon wrote about Jesus in the boat, “Jesus is the first fisher of people; his catch is immense.”<sup>6</sup>

When he finished, he told Simon to go out to fish again. Simon replies, “Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.”<sup>7</sup> When Simon sees the haul of fish, Jesus is no longer just his master. Simon falls on his knees before Jesus and says, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”<sup>8</sup> Luke’s Jesus responds, “Do not fear.”<sup>9</sup> Unlike Jesus in Mark and Matthew, Jesus in Luke

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 4:43.

<sup>6</sup> François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, trans. Christine Thomas, Hermeneia, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 171.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 5:5.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 5:8.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 5:10. My translation.

doesn't say to Simon that he will be a fisher of men and women. He uses a verb: "from now on you will be catching alive men and women."<sup>10</sup> Simon and his companions, the brothers James and John, leave everything and follow him.

Jesus did not find acceptance among the people who thought they knew who he was. Jesus found a welcome home in the lives of those who were open to hearing from him the "good news of the dominion of God."<sup>11</sup>

A month ago, we began reading the Book of Genesis as the first reading at Daily Evening Prayer. Of course, Genesis begins with two very different creation stories. The first thing we will learn about the family of Adam and Eve is that their elder son will murder his brother.<sup>12</sup> According to Genesis, with the generation of Noah, God will restart, as it were, the human family with the flood. Noah and his family are the only persons left alive left.<sup>13</sup> The journey of humankind will

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<sup>10</sup> Luke 5:10.

<sup>11</sup> Luke 4:43. My translation.

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 4:1–16.

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 6:5–9:19.

continue with a God who reveals himself over time in the lives of human beings.

One of the most important things we learn while hearing the stories in Genesis is that the Hebrew people know and worship a God who is beyond creation. Other peoples worshiped the sun, the stars, and the forces of nature as gods. And often worshiped kings and rulers as gods. But the Lord God revealed himself to Abraham as the Creator who is, to use Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sack's words, "*beyond* nature."<sup>14</sup> Sacks adds, "There is only one thing in the universe on which [God] has set [God's] image: the human person, *every* person, powerful and powerless alike."<sup>15</sup>

In Genesis, God on God's way to deal with the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah—the Lord and and/or three others—perhaps messengers, that is, angels; the text actually is contradictory here—visit Abraham's tent, his home. Abraham asks Sarah to prepare food for them, and Abraham serves them.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> <http://rabbisacks.org/god-and-strangers-vayera-5779/>, (accessed 9 February 2018).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Genesis 18:1–33.

Sacks writes, “It is easy to receive the Divine Presence when God appears as God. What is difficult is to sense the Divine Presence when it comes disguised as three anonymous passers-by . . . [Abraham] knew that serving God and offering hospitality to strangers were not two things but one.”<sup>17</sup> The roots of Luke the evangelist proclaiming, not only that Jesus but also Adam was the son of God<sup>18</sup> are very, very deep in the Judeo-Christian tradition. And there are many words about welcoming the stranger, the sojourner, in the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. It’s an issue that has been with humankind since the beginning of the human family. And is not dealt with by denying the reality of the challenges and opportunities the movement of peoples across borders presents.

My work here at Saint Mary’s has given me and many members of this congregation opportunities to follow the admonition in the last chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Sacks.

<sup>18</sup> Luke 1:35, 3:38.

<sup>19</sup> Hebrews 13:2.

You and I can help people who are in need. My hunch is that if you are here today you are a person who is already doing this for others as you are able.

Sometimes it's inconvenient; often we can't know whether our help will be used for the purpose for which it has been given. Like Simon, we remain in this life sinners, but with Simon, James, and John, we are here to listen to the Word and to trust and to follow him in the unique way we hear him calling each of us.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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