

February 10, 2019
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Luke 5:1-11

Insanity

You've maybe heard that saying about the definition of insanity, a saying that has to do with repeated actions and subsequent expectations. "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting different results." According to that, Jesus was crazy. There the disciples were (though, technically, they weren't yet disciples, they hadn't yet left everything to follow him), there they were, on the lake of Gennesaret, they had been there all night, fishing, tossing their nets over the side of the boat, again and again, and they had nothing to show for it. And then Jesus comes along and says, "Let your nets down again." As if they should expect anything different! One of the more vocal fishermen, a guy named Simon Peter, points this out, "We've been doing this all night, and we have caught nothing." But Jesus wants them to do the very same thing, yet again, let down their nets. Jesus thinks things might be different this time. Crazy.

Perhaps even crazier, though, is what Simon Peter says next—after they do what Jesus says and they do have different results. Now, when there is an abundant catch, Simon Peter loses it. At the sight of all those fish, the fisherman becomes unhinged. He falls to his knees before Jesus—and then tells Jesus to go away. Simon Peter now calls Jesus "Lord," while at the same time undergoes such intense introspection, feels such a deep sense of remorse, that all he can say is, "I am a sinful man!"

It seems a strange thing to say, on what should be payday. It's a fishing story, why is Peter talking about sin? And why now? It's not like he was caught running a red, I mean, a "dark yellow" light. He hadn't doctored his tax returns, or parked his boat in the handicapped spot. At this point in the gospel, Simon Peter has barely been introduced. As a first century fishermen out working all night, he probably didn't smell like roses, but nothing we've heard about him so far suggests a lack of ethics, let alone moral depravity. He hasn't cut off anyone's ear. He hasn't denied and deserted the best man he ever knew. He has just been fishing, for a very long time. He's been doing the same thing again and again, and then Jesus asks him to do it again, and Simon Peter points out that might not make a lot of sense. "Yet if you say so..."

Simon Peter must have groaned, at least inwardly, as he said that. He'd been up all night, he must have been weary, "Yet if you say so..." It's a statement that indicates agreement, but it doesn't seem very agreeable. I always think it sounds a bit put upon, as if Simon Peter is simply humoring Jesus, but he really knows better—and to all indications he would. He's the fishermen, after all, not Jesus. Fishing is what Simon Peter knows how to do, and his very recent experience doing so offers compelling evidence that Jesus, well, Jesus must be crazy, to think things would be different. They've been doing this same thing, the same repeated motions, having the same aches and pains, over and over, laboring all night, with nothing to show for it.

Sixteen and a half years ago, I spent a long and sleepless night laboring, with nothing to show for it. The contractions started at suppertime. They were moderately spaced and not too severe, and they continued that way for some time, the same thing, over and over. This was the first time that my body was experiencing this, but I was patient, I kept breathing, while my husband timed things, all night. Dawn finally came and we went to the hospital. The pain was getting more intense. But still, nothing—not dilating, or not enough. The morning crawled by,

hour after hour. Noon, and then afternoon. A couple more hours and I had it. I was tired, and in pain, and it was just more of the same. Nurses would stop by and do a quick check-in, and say, brightly, “Not yet, but soon.” I remember well my state as I heard that, again and again. Utterly exhausted, I was utterly convinced that they were not speaking to the world I was in. I turned to my husband, and, with the wisdom I believed my experience gave me the right to claim, I announced, with absolute certainty, “I am going to be stuck in this room forever.” I really believed it. And Tim said, gently—he was exhausted too, and bewildered, and gutted to watch me go through this, but even in tough times Tim has an admirable commitment to truth-telling. He said to me, “You will not be stuck in this room forever. Babies get born. It is what they do.” That baby is now bigger than I am.

We can feel stuck, sometimes. We feel stuck in rooms of pain, stuck in empty boats, stuck thinking that nothing is ever going to change, not the situation, not other people, not ourselves, doesn’t matter what we do. Why are we even doing it, this same thing, again and again? Why keep trying? We are tired, and the fish are all gone. The world is a mess, and so are we. The world is a mess. And so are we. And still, Jesus says, “Let down your nets.”

Jesus was no fisherman, but he knew about dark nights. Even this early on in the gospel, Jesus knew about dark nights, and there would darker ones still to come.

Jesus also knew about the dawn. Jesus came to announce the dawn. Jesus is the dawn. A new day, a new world, begins with him. It’s a dawn that reveals what we are—and what we can be, what we are called to be. Simon Peter groaned when Jesus asked him to let the nets down, yet again. Simon Peter groaned then, and he groaned again, and yet more deeply, when he saw that abundant catch, when he saw all those fish, that massive pile in the bottom of the boat, their eyes glassy, their gills slowing, their bodies stiffening. That was him, Simon Peter saw now, as he stared at the slimy pile. That was him. His own eyes glazing over, his body stiff, his being grown cold, caught up as he was in the conviction that nothing could or would ever change, that it was just the same old same old, over and again. That was him, before Jesus came and told him, “Do not be afraid. That’s not all you are. That’s not all there is.” Jesus came to free him, Jesus came to free us, from fear, to free us from sin, to free us from believing that what we know and what we do is all this old world is.

There’s a quote by the novelist and essayist and activist, Arundhati Roy, she says, “Another world is not only possible, she is on her way.” Not only possible, on her way, another world, a new life, a new birth, it is coming, the contractions have already begun. We could also quote the apostle Paul on this, Romans, chapter 8, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait ...”

People said Jesus was crazy. It is one of the possible conclusions, as the quote from C.S. Lewis says, “A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman, or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon, or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God.”

Like Peter did. Like we can do, and so live in that other world, and hasten its arrival, by doing the same things, over and over: by repenting of our locked in ways, by praising the one who releases us, by leaving behind our fear, by reaching out to, fishing for, catching others in that love.