

Genesis 1:1-2

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Luke 5:1-11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, ²he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. ⁴When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.' ⁵Simon answered, 'Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.' ⁶When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. ⁷So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!' ⁹For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; ¹⁰and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.' ¹¹When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Fishing in the Deep

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Text: *Genesis 1:1-2, Luke 5:1-11*

Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch, Jesus says.

Imagine the deep. Imagine a place of foreboding, a place that is unfamiliar, mysterious, and threatening—a place that is chaotic and that seems uncontrollable—a *formless void*. Now, imagine you have just finished a hard long night of fishing in treacherous waters. Your bones and muscles are weary. You are tired and you still have nets to clean and repair before you can sleep. Your fishing was fruitless; the fish were nowhere to be found. You are frustrated and, perhaps, a bit edgy, and so are your partners who are cleaning their nets a little further down the shore.

Then along comes a man and a crowd is following him. As this man gets a little closer you hear him speaking, no, he's preaching to an unruly group. "Ah, yes, this is that Jesus fellow from down the road," you say to yourself. You heard he can really preach up a storm, and your mother-in-law says he took her fever away and that he has helped others get rid of their personal demons. You are really not sure what to make of this guy. "Ach, this is all I need; they're coming right at me. Look at those people. They can't get enough of him. They are crowding him so close he is going to get backed right into the lake. He'll have to walk on water if they don't give him some more space."

"What's this? He wants to borrow my boat to preach on? Does this boat look like a pulpit to you? Oh, well, I'll have my mother-in-law to answer to if I don't help him! Let's go."

Simon Peter was having a bad day. Nothing was going right for him and here comes Jesus, a relative stranger, asking him to do things that he considers a little odd, even a bit ridiculous, *especially* when Jesus asks him to put out in to the deep and start fishing again. Peter knew there was no fish out there that day, and he knew how quickly the weather could change on the lake, out in the deep waters, and he was in no physical shape or frame of mind for more dangerous work. Either because he felt a sense of obligation for how Jesus had helped his family, or simply in hearing Jesus' preaching, something stirred in him, something hit home in his heart. He finally acquiesces and takes Jesus out on the lake. Now he does not ask his partners James and John to go with him at first. He tells Jesus "*I will let down the nets.*" (Luke 5:5d) He is not about to ask his partners to be part of what might just be a lark into the deepest and most dangerous part of the lake.

Now we know from the scriptures that Simon Peter is a person who really struggles in the work that becomes his discipleship. He rebukes Jesus when he thinks Jesus is not following the plan or does not measure up to his idea of what a messiah should be or do. He later denies knowing Jesus. But, Simon Peter is also a person that has deep enough faith to leave his business, the comforts of home, and follow Jesus into

an uncertain future. Together they will challenge the deep, the chaos and the unknown, on that fishing trip. Jesus chooses Peter even though Peter is a broken person and because Jesus loves Peter in all his humanity. Jesus counts on the bedrock faith that Peter has to keep him in the game. Jesus knows his disciple will continue to fight for something he so deeply believes in—and for the world they want to create. Jesus counts on Peter even when Peter does not think himself worthy.

In the midst of the chaos and battle of that fishing trip a great haul of fish is netted. The haul of fish is so large, so successful that it begins to sink the boat. Jesus and Peter are becoming victims of their own success. So they call for some help from James and John and together they all bring in the catch. And in an irony of all ironies when Peter, James and John get back to the shore what do they do? They leave everything and follow Jesus. There is greater work to be done. There are souls to catch and people to fish out of the deep of life. But we know that even as successful as those early followers of Jesus were the struggles against chaos continued and the disciples, the people of the Way, along with their God continue to reenter the deep places of life—the places where the love of God and the presence of the Spirit do not win every battle or overcome every obstacle. Jesus and some of the disciples even lose their lives.

In our passage today from the first chapter of Genesis we hear that before God created the heavens and the earth that “the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep.” Perhaps the Lukan author, knowing Genesis, included this fishing story and chose the setting as of the deepest part of the lake to make a point. Jesus and Simon Peter had to struggle together in a paradoxical place of such danger, but such promise. This deep place where Jesus and Peter fished was like the primordial chaos that the spirit of God hovered over when waging a struggle to create life. Harvard Hebrew Scriptures scholar Jon Levenson tells us that “to [the] ancients, the opposite of the created order was something much worse than ‘nothing.’ It was an active, malevolent force we can best term ‘chaos.’ In our verse [from Genesis], chaos is envisioned as a dark, undifferentiated mass of water...In [this verse] water itself and darkness, too, are primordial...[Levenson says] In the Ancient Near East...to say that a deity had subdued chaos is to give [that deity] the highest praise.”¹

Now Genesis and Luke are just of two of many places in the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament where God and humans interact with water and the deep: sometimes God is parting it, flooding the world with it, walking in the recesses of it, or rescuing people from it; we find Jesus is walking on it, changing it to really good wine, or calming the raging sea storm. Notice that the God we worship does not destroy the water, the deep. The struggles with water, with chaos, continue and God seeks our interaction and help. Jon Levenson also comments on Psalm 74, which is a psalm of lament and pleading, for God to once again come to Israel’s rescue and help in *their* struggle. Levenson says the psalm “attests eloquently to an Israelite myth of combat between God and aquatic beasts, followed by [God’s] triumphant act of world ordering. This is a myth (Levenson says) that speaks of God’s total mastery *not* as something self-evident...but as something won, as something dramatic and exciting. [Also in the Genesis] story of Noah and the Flood...humanity’s injustice threatens to undo the work

¹ Jon D. Levenson, “Genesis or *Bere’shit*” annotated notes in the *Jewish Study Bible*, (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 13.

of creation, to cause the world to revert to the primordial aquatic state from which it had emerged.”² Levenson says that these stories from our scripture “attest to a view of creation in which God’s ordering of reality is irresistible, but not constant or inevitable.”³ God does not win the day everyday.

In the struggle against chaos and disorder God seeks to enlist us into the fray. The Jewish teachers, or rabbis, including Jesus the rabbi, ask us to enter into this epic struggle. In the Ancient Near East the struggle was against those who would oppress and enslave a people, against rulers who would murder innocent children, or the interior battle of individuals like Peter who struggled in their efforts to follow the right path. The struggle goes on today. We might ask ourselves if the struggle today is against a government that would manufacture reasons for war, rather than construct bridges to peace? Is it against a culture that denies basic civil rights to a people who are of a different color and want the same rights to an education and a job? Is it against a legal system where couples who have a different sexual orientation simply want the same rights and benefits of their married friends who live next door, and who want society to acknowledge the reality that they are just as married as their next door neighbors? Or, it is against a health care system that forces our elderly to seek affordable prescription drugs in Mexico and Canada and a system so costly that millions of people go without adequate health care every day? Perhaps, still, it is a struggle against those personal demons that separate us from God and wage war within each one us.

Sometimes the forces of the deep chaos overwhelm us, and devastate our world. But just as God is there to suffer with us, God also needs our help. God needs us to get into that boat and row out into those deeps waters and cast our nets for all those people drowning in oppression and injustice, or, to minister to those struggling in the chaos and inner turmoil of life. Our prayers of encouragement and pleading are especially needed in those times when God seems so distant to us, when the world seems out of control. God needs our help in the struggle for justice, peace and love. With our help God *will* prevail.

*Jesus calls us, o’er the tumult of our life’s wild, restless sea; Day by day that voice still calls us, saying, “Christian, follow me.”*⁴

Let’s go fishing.

Amen.

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² Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 9-10.

³ Levenson, 1988, 12.

⁴ Cecil F. Alexander, “Jesus Calls Us, o’er the Tumult”, Hymn 172, in the *New Century Hymnal*, (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1995).