

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Trinity Sunday, July 12, 2009

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In the gospel (Luke 5:1f.), Peter experienced his greatest catch ever, then decided to fish no more (except for one reminder catch after the Resurrection—John 21:1-11). He might have responded differently. Peter might have said, “Thank you Jesus. We worked so hard and thought that it was all for nothing. But now we have something to show for our labor!” And then he might have said, “Jesus, can you come back tomorrow at the same time?”

But Peter was curiously uninterested in the fish. After they brought the boat to shore, “They forsook all, and followed him.” This shows that the main point of the gospel is not that many fish were miraculously caught; the main point is that, because of the miracle, Peter recognized who Jesus is.

When Jesus, by his power as the Son of God, did what Peter was unable to do with much labor and his best fishing expertise, Peter recognized the presence of the Almighty God who orders all things by his word. Seeing God in Jesus, he “fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, ‘Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord.’”

Peter’s response calls to mind the response of Isaiah the prophet. After Isaiah saw God in the temple in all his glory, Isaiah said, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts” (Isaiah 6:5).

Isaiah saw God in his glory, but Peter discerned the Incarnation. As Jesus exercised his sovereign power over the fish in a certain portion of the Sea of Galilee, Peter recognized the Word made flesh (John 1:14). Peter saw the glory of God shining in the face of Jesus (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Our vision of God is usually more like Peter’s vision than Isaiah’s. Few of us see God in his full glory. Rather, we come to recognize the presence of God as Jesus exercises his sovereign power over the events of our lives.

We say we believe in “One God the Father Almighty” and in “One Lord Jesus Christ.” These statements are articles of faith, but they are also challenges for God’s almighty power is not always self-evident. We experience tribulation and tragedy. There is more than a little chaos and disorder in the world.

Clearly, God’s almighty power does not mean that bad things never happen. The God who created the world and said, “It is good,” also gave free will to the people he made and let them bring evil and death into the world. The question is always, How can God be almighty when people are also free to do what is evil?

The answer is that God’s almighty power is shown in the way God uses even what is evil to accomplish his will, As Romans says, “All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose” (8:28).

We remember the Old Testament story of Joseph, who was cruelly sold into slavery by his jealous brothers and subjected to further injustices in Egypt. Yet, God never ceased to be almighty in Joseph's life. Joseph's presence in Egypt became the means by which God saved Israel from extinction in the famine. Joseph explained God's sovereignty when he said to his brothers, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20).

This is the overarching theme of the Old Testament. God accomplishes his will through human beings whose actions are not always laudable, in spite of many who try to undermine what God is doing. God's sovereignty is shown in this. Though there are many twists and turns along the way, the story of Israel leads to the Messiah just as God planned and promised.

This is also the story of the church. People complain of crusades and inquisitions and unholy behavior on the part of key members of the church. Some even say, "How can you believe in God when his people do such things?" But that is just the point. God is sovereign and he is able to accomplish his will anyway, even when his people aren't all they should be.

This is the story of each of our lives. We may regret any number of misfortunes, missed opportunities and tragedies. We have all done things that we ought not to have done and left undone things that we ought to have done. By ourselves, apart from God, we have toiled all of our lives and have taken nothing.

"Nevertheless at thy word I will let down the net." When we hear God's word and respond with faith, a miracle takes place. God takes all of the chaotic and fruitless elements of our lives and uses them to accomplish his will. By his sovereign power, he makes all things work together for good.

There are certain moments in life when we are able to see this; when we are able to see how God is working to bring the beauty of his new creation out of the disorder of our lives; when we are able to see how God is using bad things to accomplish good things.

At such moments, we begin to understand the meaning of grace, which is God's unmerited favor towards us. When we see God, we see ourselves more clearly. Like Peter and Isaiah, we realize that we are sinful and unclean. Yet, we also realize that this is the point of grace. God works in our lives for good anyway, in spite of our sin.

The result of the miraculous catch was that Peter became a fisher of men. Seeing God made him less concerned about fish. Something similar happens to us when we see God at work in our lives. We also become a little less concerned about the things of life, and a little more attentive to the ways that God is calling us to serve him.