

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Keeping God at Arm’s Length”

Rev. David K. Groth

Feb. 6, 2022

“Go away from me, Lord. . .!” (Lk. 5:8)

Peter had been working at it all night, casting out the nets, pulling them in again. It is grinding and laborious, especially when you have nothing to show for it. Jesus suggests they put out into deeper waters. Peter knows it’ll be wasted effort, but it is Jesus. So, going against all his years of fishing experience, defying a lifetime of knowledge about his vocation, he follows the carpenter’s advice. They take the boat out into deeper water, put the net down, and right there is a great big school of fish. When they try pulling it in, their nets begin to break; the Lord’s generosity proves too much.

This generosity is typical of the Lord. The people of Israel were never able to pick up all the manna on the desert floor, or eat all the quail, or drink all the water from the Rock. There were leftovers at the feeding of the five thousand, twelve basketfuls. Hopefully, there were leftovers at the wedding at Cana where at least 120 gallons of water were turned into a very fine wine. Yet today, when we hear what the Lord gives in Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. . . forgiveness, life, salvation, it’s hard to take it all in. There are leftovers. There is more given than we can receive.

Peter signals his partners back on shore to help them out, so a second boat pulls along and they fill both of them so full of fish that the boats are riding precariously low in the water. One would think Peter would be happy, and asking, “How’d you do that? How’d you know all those fish would be there? How ‘bout we meet here again tomorrow and do this again.” That’s what a fisherman and entrepreneur would say but it’s not what Peter says – “Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man.” In verse 5 he had called Jesus “Master” a term of respect. Now he calls Jesus “Lord.” Why does Peter ask his Lord to go away? Why is Peter trying to keep the Lord at arm’s length?

Peter is in the immediate presence of God, and if there’s anything Peter knows with a certainty is he’s full of sin and shame, but God is holy. Peter feels just like Isaiah in the Old Testament lesson. “Woe is me. I’m done for! For I am a man of unclean lips living amidst a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” Both Isaiah and Peter, as sinners, are desperate for distance from holy God.

Sometimes we like to think it is God who wants to keep us at arm’s length, and we have to go out and find Him. We have to seek Him in nature or the fine arts or dabble in some other home-grown spiritualism, or travel to some distant land and hire your own personal guru of Eastern religion. People will go to great lengths to try to find and draw near to God.

Or they’ll try to fill that God-sized hole in their souls with little manmade idols of various sorts. I’m thinking now of young, nonreligious Americans who continue to search for purpose and identity and significance; but they try to find these things in gyms and therapist’s offices and places of work and travel experiences. The fervor with which young Americans do all this can be described only as religious. Although they are less likely to be found in church, they are not less likely to have these religious impulses. They still seek forgiveness and meaning and will pursue anything that might make them feel significant. They are in search of God, but God isn’t hiding. Remember, it was God who flushed sinful Adam and Eve out of the bushes, not the other way around. We are the ones who try to keep God at arm’s length, and God is the One who must come out like a shepherd in search of His lost sheep.

Do you remember that old Sunday School picture of Jesus standing at the door knocking? Someone said when Jesus knocks at your door, maybe you shouldn’t answer. After all, if you do, he might come in. And if he comes in, he might start rearranging all the furniture in your house. He might reorganize your life and shuffle your priorities and find there are better things you can do with your money, your time, your skills. He might tell you to change some things about you, things you don’t want to change. It might be easier to keep Him at arm’s length and say, with Peter, “Go away from me, Lord.”

It certainly was a miraculous catch that day. We often think of miracles as singular events. Jesus turns water into wine. Jesus heals the ten lepers. Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. Many miracles are one-time, isolated events.

But sometimes miracles come in pairs. They happen more than once, and when miracles come in pairs, it’s helpful to see how they interact with one another. For example, the feeding of the five thousand among the Jews happens again. It’s paralleled by the feeding of the four thousand, this time among the Gentiles, and it shows the expanding ministry of Jesus who has come to save not just Israel but all nations.

Similarly, the miraculous catch of fish in the presence of Peter happens twice. The first, is our text, where Peter finally understands Jesus is not just master or teacher. Jesus is the Lord his God. Therefore, “go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man.”

The second occurrence of this miracle is recorded in John chapter 21. Jesus has just been crucified and is risen. But the disciples are still in hiding for fear of the Jews. Jesus has appeared to them twice in the upper room, but still the disciples hide. One evening, Peter decides he can no longer be cooped up. He says, "I'm going fishing." Some of the others decide to join him, figuring its night, they'll soon be out on the lake, they should be safe enough. Once again, they work all night, have nothing to show for it. It could be God is frustrating any plans they might have to resurrect the family fishing business.

As dawn approaches a man appears on the shore, but the disciples are about a hundred yards offshore and the light is dim. They can only make out the silhouette of a man. He calls out to them, "Children, do you have any fish?" I think Jesus is enjoying the moment, savoring it, playing with them a little. The disciples answer with a curt "no". Jesus tells them, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you'll find some." "Fat chance" they must have thought. "Left side, right side, it makes no difference today." But then, maybe it was déjà vu that prompted them to give it one last try. They cast off the right side of the boat. Right where they're supposed to be, there's a load of large fish. John cries out, "It's the Lord!"

You recall that just days before Peter had boasted he would gladly die with Jesus rather than forsake Him. But when push came to shove, Peter denied even knowing Jesus, and the rooster crowed, and Peter wept bitter tears.

Once again, Peter is in the nearer presence of the Lord His God and is feeling all the guilt and the shame. But this time Peter does not fall on his knees. This time Peter does not beg the Lord to go away. This time, Peter can't even wait for the slow progress of the boat. This time, Peter jumps into the water to get to Jesus just as fast as he possibly can. Can you see him out there, swimming free style, head above water, until his feet touch the bottom, and he starts plowing ashore, arms pumping?

What accounts for the difference in Peter's response? First this: Peter has been following Jesus for three years now. For three years he's been listening to Jesus teach and preach about the Kingdom of God. Three years of watching Him have mercy on sinners, forgiving them, even protecting them from the scorn of others. ("Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.") Peter witnessed these things. He saw how Jesus freed sinners from their captivity. He had mercy on so many more who were in need. To the hungry, He provides food. To the sick, He provides healing. To those hiding in shame, He provides a place of honor. To those who have sinned, He proclaims His forgiveness.

Standing between these two miracles, of course, is the cross of Jesus. Standing between these two miracles is the cross where the Lamb of God is sacrificed for the sin of the world. Standing between these two miracles is the resurrection of Jesus, and the words of Jesus in the upper room, "Peace, be with you." Three times He said it to His disciples up there. This wasn't a greeting. He was absolving them.

Peter saw so much during those three years. We know Peter hasn't substantively changed. He's still a poor, miserable sinner. But what has changed is Peter's knowledge of Jesus. He sees in Jesus the Savior who has mercy on sinners. He sees in Jesus the one who touches lips with a hot coal, saying "your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." Faced with the choice of living in sin and shame for the rest of his days, or entrusting his life to Jesus, Peter rushes ashore because he knows Jesus is merciful.

You and I have been baptized, and yet, we remain sinners. We just can't shake it. Substantively we are still weak, unholy, unjust, full of sin and shame.

The Good News is Jesus remains who He is. He does not change. We interact with the One with whom Peter interacted. When we come to Him full of sin and shame, we come to our crucified, resurrected Lord who says, "Peace be with you!" We come to Him who is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love".

We don't have to live in sin and shame any more than Peter did. We can run to Jesus, because Jesus is here, waiting to receive and forgive. He promises that no sin, nothing you have thought, said, or done, will be held against you. Jesus did not come to condemn Peter or you. He came to love us into heaven by dying on the cross for us.

Jesus is not content being at arm's length, so He comes to us in Holy Baptism, and stays with us, and makes himself at home in us (Jn. 14:23). Today, He comes to you in His Supper, where he gives Himself to you to eat and drink so that his body and blood can mingle with your body and blood and transform it and cleanse it. There's no dodging God when He's in your mouth. There's no keeping God at arm's length when He's circulating through your blood stream seeking every cell of you that needs forgiveness.

The invitation today, then, is to let down the barriers and stop trying to keep God at arm's length. Let him come into your heart, your soul, your plans, your life . . . that fierce love of God in Jesus Christ. Amen.