

### Jesus at Lake Gennesaret

by Robb McCoy

Peter, Andrew, James, and John are the first four disciples of Jesus. They are fishermen who live and toil on the Sea of Galilee (this body of fresh water is connected to the Dead Sea by the Jordan River. It is known also as the Sea of Tiberius. The writer of Luke calls it "Lake Gennesaret," which comes from the Hebrew word for "harp." If you look at a map, you'll see why it would be called that.)

Peter is brought to his knees by a chain of events that includes last week's story as well. Remember, he has seen Jesus heal his own mother-in-law. He has presumably seen or heard about Jesus healing in the synagogue. In today's story, he lets Jesus use his boat so he can get some space between him and those who want to hear him teach.

When Jesus tells Peter to go out into the deeper water and cast his net, Peter's response is obedience, and he calls Jesus, "Master," an honorific that indicates he is already compelled by Jesus. What comes next however, is the enormous catch of fish that almost sinks his boat.

Peter's response was "Leave me, Lord, for I am a sinner." In this moment Peter joins in the long tradition of reluctant prophets. Throughout our Biblical story, when people are confronted with the presence of the divine, there is a sense of fear and inadequacy.

Moses, when called by God, thought he could not speak well enough (Exodus 4:10). Jeremiah believed he was too young (Jeremiah 1:5-6). Isaiah protested that he was a man of unclean lips (Isaiah 6:5).

Jesus' reply is two parts. First, he says, "Fear not." This is also a typical response of the divine for people who are in awe. This phrase was used by God's messengers three times in the birth story - once to Zechariah, once to Mary, and once to the shepherds.

The second part is the famous call to evangelism: "From now on you will be fishing for people." What can we make of this enigmatic conversation and miracle?

**Peter is the model disciple.** He listens, obeys, repents, and responds. This is not a simple call story. It reveals a process of relationship that Jesus cultivated in Peter. Yes, there is a climactic moment, but it did not

*Tilapia, also known as "St. Peter's Fish" swimming in Lake Gennesaret. (Taken by Michael MK Khor, posted to his flickr.com photostream.)*



come out of nowhere.

**"Go deep."** When Jesus tells Peter to go out into the deep water, he is inviting him into a relationship that goes beyond the surface. In our faith, we are called to do the same. We need to move beyond surface-level faith. Surface faith does not challenge us. Surface level Bible reading supports our prejudices and allows us to have narrow focus on our own interpretation. Deep reading allows for historical context, literary criticism, and diverse commentators. Deep faith reveals questions, and challenges presuppositions. Deep faith might also allow us to question this famous phrase:

**"Become fishers of people."** While this is often thought of as an evangelistic call to find followers, a deeper reading may reveal a deeper meaning. In Amos 4:2, Ezekiel 29:4, and Jeremiah 16:16, the prophets use metaphors of fishing for tearing down the oppressive systems. For these prophets, "Fishers of people," were those who God would use to end injustice and exploitation.

This week in particular, as many non-profits were threatened with defunding that would do incredible harm, these words rang true for me. "Fish for people," was a reminder that I need to fish for allies. Our call to fish for people is a challenge to find our people who will work and advocate to build community. We need to fish for people who will help the immigrant, feed the hungry, and care for the marginalized. This is how we follow Jesus and become "fishers of people."

Evangelism and justice work are not mutually exclusive. Our call to follow Jesus includes the need to find our people who will break chains of oppression and preach the good news of the Kingdom of God.