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## Who We Really Are

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church*

*Luke 5:1-11, February 6, 2022*

If you have ever spent any time around lakes or oceans, you will know that the surface of most bodies of water looks the same. Whether you're on the local lake or the Pacific Ocean or Lake Superior, whether it's 10 feet deep or 10 miles deep, when you're sitting in a boat on top of it, the surface looks the same.

But the truth is that it isn't the same. While we might know almost everything there is to know about what's in the local pond, the latest science estimates that we've only explored maybe 20 percent of the ocean at best<sup>1</sup>—that we know more about the surface of the moon and Mars than we do about the deep places of the ocean. We don't even know what we don't know. We've found strange beings in the ocean like “the *male* seahorse who gives birth to 2000 babies at a time,” a “tuskfish who knows how to use tools,” and a “conehead fish that can change its sex.” And we haven't even begun to figure out how many countless life forms we don't know, there in the depths, beyond light.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See National Ocean Service, “How Much of the Ocean Have We Explored?”, in *National Ocean Service*, accessed Feb. 3, 2021 at <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/exploration.html>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://sciencing.com/underwater-exploration-news-13722433.html>

In scripture, images of depths of water are meant to evoke the vast mystery of the Divine. No matter what we know or experience about God, we cannot ever come to the end of it. In the first few verses of the Bible, the Hebrew imagination pictures the Spirit of God, hovering over the face of the deep. I imagine that the deep is the formless body of God itself. And out of this vast mystery, God says, Let there be light. And there was light. Out of the very being of God, all that exists is created. The medieval mystic Julian of Norwich said that we weren't so much made *by* God as *of* God. This is our deepest essence.

In today's gospel reading we have the familiar story of Jesus calling the first disciples. It's worth noting that in this version of the story in Luke, Jesus doesn't call the disciples by verbally inviting them to follow him, but by giving a set of experiences which so move them that they leave everything to follow him on their own. After borrowing Simon's boat to teach the crowds, Jesus tells Simon to put out to the deep water and cast his nets. Simon was already exhausted from working all night and catching nothing. But he is willing to humor Jesus, so he puts out to the deep water with him, this water he thought he knew so well, and catches an abundant supply of fish where he previously had found none.

It's no accident that Simon Peter begins his discipleship with Jesus on the face of deep water. He begins there because the deep water is the place of creation in the Hebrew imagination. He begins there because despite his best efforts, all by himself he could not touch that which was nourishing in those waters, even though it was there all along. He needed the grace of Christ to do it.

And it's so interesting that Peter's first response seems to be shame. "Get away from me, I am a sinful man," he says. Maybe that's Peter recognizing the shocking difference between the character and wisdom and power of Jesus sitting before him, and what Peter knows about his own habits of thinking and being. But Jesus came to show us how to recover our deepest and truest selves, which is deeper than any and all storms at our surface, all our rages and pettiness and hurts, and all that we think we know about who we are. Jesus came to show us how to recover that of God from deep within us. And the way we do this isn't so much addition, as it is subtraction. It's not to add something. It's to stop confusing ego with identity, which means we are less hooked by the ego's occasional storms and tantrums. It's to strip away the lies that empire tells about who is worthy and who is not and why. This is why Jesus can say to Peter, don't be afraid, even though yes, we all need to do some work to help recognize our deepest identities, and to live from that place. This is the path of Christian discipleship, of apprenticing to Jesus' Way of Love.

It has been said that the disciples left everything to follow Jesus because they saw in him the fullness of God, and they wanted the fullness of God for themselves. Have you ever found yourself drawn to someone, wanting to spend time with someone, because they seemed to have a character or quality that you wanted? Although in the U.S. today we may not have as many wandering rabbis, I think we've all read a book or heard a TED talk or seen a Tik Tok when someone said something that struck us as really true, and we've literally "followed" that person on social media. Maybe the disciples' experience isn't so foreign after all. The path of following Jesus is engaging in the steps that uncover, illuminate, and

unite our truest selves with God. Long ago Christian mystics called this *katharsis*, *fotosis*, *theosis*: *katharsis*, to purify or uncover or reveal; *fotosis*, to illuminate in a nourishing way as a leaf experiences photosynthesis in sunlight; and finally *theosis*, union with God.

It may seem strange that I'm talking about our deepest selves made in goodness when this week's news has been so distressing. We are in anguish over the police killing 22-year old Amir Locke in his bed in Minneapolis on Wednesday. We are in anguish that 15-year old Jahmari Rice was shot and killed in front of his high school in Richfield this week. My friend called me this week and told me she just couldn't stand it anymore. How can I talk about our goodness in face of these ongoing, endless, monstrous evils? The systems that make violence like this seem not only predictable but inevitable?

Celtic theologian John Philip Newell talks about our need to say both a deep "no" and a deep "yes" in our spiritual journeys. We are called to say an emphatic and prophetic *no* to the many ways we have failed to honor the sacred in all other life. But our "no's" will achieve nothing if we have not first said *yes* to the essence of God in our core. We must say an intimate and loving *yes* to God's endless call, deep within us, to reunite with who we really are. This is our purpose, the purpose of Jesus' Way of Love, and of all the great spiritual traditions. The disciples in today's gospel story left everything because in Jesus they found the memory of who they really were, as theologian John Scotus would say.<sup>3</sup> All spiritual practice, every step in Jesus' Way of Love, is to remember and reconnect with our true nature.

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<sup>3</sup> See Rev. Dr. John Philip Newell, "Lenten Preaching Series," March 7, 2013 at Calvary Episcopal Church Memphis, accessed Feb. 3, 2022 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VTtYnJYDE00>.

There was a woman suffering from advanced dementia in a church I served. She had forgotten all of her friends' names, and all of the memories she and her friends had together. She had forgotten what to call a pot and a pan, or how to use them on the stove. But every single week after church, even though she couldn't remember my name, she approached me after the service and said, "you did such a good job this week. Especially this week, the service was *really* good." She had forgotten almost everything about how to operate in the world, but stripped to her core, she always remembered to come encourage and affirm me. That touched me so much. Her core was about overflowing goodness. It's always there no matter what the surface of things looks like. It's who she is, and who I am, and who you are. It's who Amir Locke was, and also who Officer Mark Hanneman is.

Our spiritual practices—turn, learn, pray, worship, bless, go and rest—are a contemporary attempt to capture the ancient wisdom of Jesus that helps uncover, illuminate and unite our truest selves with God. What do you need to let go of to remember who you really are? Everything we do at St John's is about exploring those questions together, so that we can live Jesus' radical gospel in the world—the gospel that insists all living beings are sacred, therefore nothing should be exploited, no one should be dominated or demonized.

The ancient wisdom of Christ still calls to us, still invites us to dare to explore the deep places of our being, the oceans that contain monsters in them but also are the birthplace of creation. Perhaps you've looked at the surface of this water, of who you are or what church is, and thought, there is nothing here I don't know, and I'm not interested. But look again.

What is right under the surface, with the help and grace of God in Christ, can nourish us far beyond what we could have imagined. We need something beyond utterly spiritless secularism, literal fundamentalism, or mushy and vague spirituality that is too nice to have any power. We need the ancient wisdom made fresh and potent and alive by our rigorous and creative engagement, and by the presence of God and of Christ who never left, who is still right here calling to us. What do you need to say yes to? What do you need to say no to? Let's have courage to make this journey together. Amen.