

January 26, 2020 - Epiphany 3A
"The Jesus Net" - Rev Seth Jones
Scripture - Matthew 4:12-23

God reaches into the deepest corners of the world and catches up in the implicitly woven love of all things all living things, which includes you and I. From the very beginnings, God casts out wide and far with a shimmering, vast, gossamer net for those who so choose to be caught up in it. Sometimes, the creatures of creation swim deeper, leaving the net and any possibility of getting tangled in the struggles of love, grace, freedom. Sometimes, those struggles tear the great net and we need to sit with others to mend the net. Sometimes, hopefully, we turn and swim into God's shimmering net of grace.

In our reading today, Jesus heads up to the Sea of Galilee after finding out about John the Baptist's arrest. The area of Zebulun and Naphtali, named after two of the twelve tribes of Israel, were hinterlands, far off places in the day. Zebulun and Naphtali were beautiful, fertile lands right on a direct path from the north east, where the Assyrians and Romans would make their brutal and violent entrances. It was a land populated with, as Isaiah says, Gentiles, people of other nations. This is where Jesus goes to begin his ministry. He goes to the edges, to the places God went from the very beginnings of the stories of Scripture, to the lands of peasants, edge-dwellers, people not like him.

Once there, Jesus begins to proclaim the very same words John the Baptist proclaimed, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near." Jesus walked the banks of the Sea of Galilee and preached the coming of the kingdom of God, casting the net of God across fishermen and carpenters and farmers and families and outcasts.

A few weeks ago, I was seeking information for something for my Doctor of Ministry and I came across an incredible image from the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. The Mahayana tradition is a more traditional, colorful expression of Buddhism, with pantheons of demi-gods and demons, levels of heaven and hell, ornate rituals, beautiful chanting, and elegant teachings. Tibetan Buddhism is an expression of Mahayana Buddhism. Within Mahayana Buddhism is what is a sort of God of gods. That God's name is Indra. If humans worship demi-gods, and demi-gods worship particular gods, then those gods worship the god of gods, who is Indra.

Indra lives in a vast palace and you know the palace is nearby when you see what covers the palace. What covers Indra's palace is a vast, shimmering net called Indra's Net. As you look at Indra's net, you begin to see that at the intersection of each string is a glittering, shimmering multidimensional jewel, all of them different colors and some of them colors beyond the spectrum of our capacity to see. As you look closer, you realize that Indra's net is like a vast matrix or network that everything in the universe is built

upon and dependent upon. Indra's net is the infinite scaffolding of creation itself, the interrelationship of all things to one another, even as their individual light shines forth at the intersection of those relationships.

As we go along here with Jesus, remember Indra's net. One day, Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee and he saw Simon Peter and Andrew casting a net into the lake. Fishing on Galilee was almost always with nets. The nets had floats on one end and weights on the other, and the nets would be thrown into the water with a well-practiced, elegant toss that spread the net out. Jesus sees the brothers fishing and tells them, "Follow me". Our translation makes this out to be a sort of command, but it is more appropriate to think of Jesus speaking an invitation, not commanding the brothers. "Come along with me", he says, "and I will make you fishers for people".

Notice the language here. Jesus invites and then tells the brothers *he* will make them fishers for people. Jesus does the work here. But even more so, listen to how the brothers respond. Our reading says, *Immediately, the left their nets and followed him.*

There is no reasoning. There is no preaching or persuasive language. There is no Jesus 101 class. There is no deliberation. Something about Jesus and his invitation, convinced both Simon Peter and Andrew to immediately follow Jesus. This is quite a net that Jesus is casting.

Let's take a moment and think about fish. Fish are pretty savvy. They know their environment. It is why for centuries fishing, especially fly-fishing, is considered by some a spiritual artform and act. When I was learning to fly-fish in Montana, I was told by several people who tried desperately to teach me to fly-fish to *think like a fish*. Fishing, at least in the ancient world and with a pole and hook and bait, is an act of prediction, intuition and a continually increasing knowledge of the environment of the fish. We are not talking about modern commercial fishing here at all.

So if you are a fish and you see the net drop, you swim the other direction, or deeper. Most likely, you will be following a school of fish, so you are at the mercy of the group. If a net fisher is very good they can predict the direction of the school and throw the net to catch up a whole school. Fish are followers. Fish are instinctual creatures. Fish do not want to be caught up in a net.

Let's stay with the fish for a few more moments. Because if you are a fish and you get caught up in the net, all your struggles to get out of the net get you hung up more deeply into the net. Then, after you have struggled yourself into exhaustion, you feel yourself moving through the water again, but this time it is not of your own will or volition. Instead, the world gets brighter. The water gets warmer. And then the thing you breathe

to survive disappears. You are yanked up into a new world, one that looks completely and utterly different from the one you were swimming in. It is incredibly bright. There are colors you have never seen. It might even be beautiful. But, and this is the most important part, you can't breathe. Your skin burns. Sound collapses in a weird way. You know, beyond all comprehension, that you are dying.

I am anthropomorphizing wildly here. I have no idea how fish think. But I imagine the world-change for the fish is extreme. I also imagine the world-change for Simon Peter and Andrew is also extreme.

The big difference between a fish caught in a net and whatever it is Jesus is catching us up in is that you and I are not fish. We are not just creatures of instinct and reaction. We have other options, and one of the options we have is to *choose to swim into the net*. This is what Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John do. Jesus casts the infinite and shimmering net of God, Indra's net, if you will, and the new disciples see the world both for what it is and what it could be and swim into Jesus' net. They choose, without even thinking about it, to get all caught up in the messy world-altering revelation of God.

This is the season of Epiphany, the season of the revealing of the light of God through Jesus Christ. The net that Jesus is throwing is at once a net of light, and also a revealing of the light. Once that deep, shimmering structure of the universe is seen, it cannot be unseen. And once we swim into that net, we are now intimate and essential participants in the continued revealing of the light. We realize, without even really thinking about it or being persuaded, that we are completely dependent on the things of God.

This is why we need to reverse how we think about becoming *fishers of people*. We are made into *fishers of people* by Jesus. Remember, he says, *I will make you fishers of people*. We are formed by the light, by the net, that Jesus has caught us up in. Perhaps, what is revealed to Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John, and us, is that we are already caught up in the net. We are freed from the nets of this world and recognize that our true home is with God.

And there are so many nets to get caught up in this world, aren't there? The net of politics is the one so many of us are caught in these days. The more we try to slither our way out of that net, the more caught we become. Liberals are mired in a vast delusion of criminal conspiracy while Republicans are committed to a mafia boss who cannot tolerate defection. The legitimacy of the law itself is under threat, while the will of the people is ignored. The more we entrench the more caught in the net we become, not realizing all of us are caught in the same net called America.

What is your net, that thing that the more you struggle to get out of, the deeper into it you get?

Many of these nets that we are caught up in, we have very little choice to be hung up in them. Upbringing, social circumstances, health, work, the people around us - there is not much we can do about some of these things. In many of those nets, very little is revealed except the fact that you are caught up in a net.

Author Richard Beck, in his book *The Slavery of Death*, describes how caught up in the world's net we can be:

Corporations and nations and other demonic powers restrict, control, and consume human life in order to sustain and extend and prosper their own survival...The principalities have great resilience; the death game which they play continues, adapting its means of dominating human beings to the sole morality which governs all demonic powers so long as they exist - survival...(William Stringfellow)

The powers, like all of us, are terrified of dying. They pretend to offer us life, or at least that we will be remembered - some significance - but the neurotic pursuit of self-esteem via service to the powers is revealed to be another manifestation of our slavery to the fear of death.¹

It seems to me, since this is the season of light and revelation, that we should be looking for the shimmering light of Jesus' net in those situations. If we keep trying to resolve the situation without Christ, well, we will just get deeper in. Conservatives trying to convince and defy liberals, and liberals trying to reason and turn conservatives; recurring arguments among family members and friends that look just like the arguments you have always had; intractable concerns with body and mind - none of these solve themselves. Some of us may be committed to the imagined outcomes we hope for, a future we want because it is what we want.

Those commitments are why it can really hurt to choose to swim into the net that Jesus has cast. We get yanked up into a new world, a world where we begin to catch a glimpse of the bejeweled net that shimmers in all things that is also called the Kingdom of God. In seeing that vast net of Christ, we may feel like we can't breathe the new air, like a fish being pulled from the water, or like a person being yanked up out of the waters of baptism.

¹ Beck, Richard. *The Slavery of Death*. pg 54. Quote found at *One Man's Web: Gasping for Air in the Kingdom*. <https://onemansweb.org/gasping-for-air-in-the-kingdom-matthew-412-23.html>

As Jesus walks along the shore of our lives, casting the net of love, inviting us to swim into it and get hung up in all the things of God, we begin to realize there is a way to at once be with God and be with one another in this world. We begin to realize with Isaiah that *the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light has dawned*. It is worth noting that this reading about nets and disciples and fish is what precedes the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount is a description of what the Kingdom of God coming to earth might look like.

God has revealed the light to us. Jesus has cast the vast bejeweled net across the world. It is a fantastic invitation to shine like the multidimensional jewels at the intersection of the strings of the net. Let us all swim into the Jesus net.

Amen.