



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

Sermon for Epiphany 5

February 9, 2025

Footsteps of the Prophets

Luke 5:1–11

¹ And it came to pass, that, as the people pressed upon him to hear the word of God, he stood by the lake of Gennesaret, ² And saw two ships standing by the lake: but the fishermen were gone out of them, and were washing their nets. ³ And he entered into one of the ships, which was Simon's, and prayed him that he would thrust out a little from the land. And he sat down, and taught the people out of the ship.

⁴ Now when he had left speaking, he said unto Simon, Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught. ⁵ And Simon answering said unto him, Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing: nevertheless at thy word I will let down the net.

⁶ And when they had this done, they inclosed a great multitude of fishes: and their net brake. ⁷ And they beckoned unto their partners, which were in the other ship, that they should come and help them. And they came, and filled both the ships, so that they began to sink. ⁸ When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord.

⁹ For he was astonished, and all that were with him, at the draught of the fishes which they had taken: ¹⁰ And so was also James, and John, the sons of Zebedee, which were partners with Simon. And Jesus said unto Simon, Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men. ¹¹ And when they had brought their ships to land, they forsook all, and followed him.

Jesus came in the footsteps and pattern of the Old Testament prophets — speaking and acting in the name of the Lord, suffering rejection and hostility, but thereby fulfilling all the promises of God. His entire life and ministry — and finally His death — were the culmination of all that the prophets themselves had spoken and suffered.

Now, as Jesus walked in the footsteps of the prophets, so He calls and prepares others to follow in His own footsteps. As the prophets had prepared the world for the Christ who was to come, so would their successors, the holy apostles, deliver the Christ who *has* come into the world.

Christ, then, is the bridge between the prophets and the apostles, and the hinge that holds them both together; everything centers and depends upon Him who was, and is, and is to come.

From the outset of today's Gospel, we hear the teaching of Jesus as the Word of God. He is the source and the location of all that we must hear to become the people of God. And so we learn from the example of the crowds to press upon Him wherever He may be found, that we might hear His Word.



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It's helpful to note that Luke was writing for those who already knew the story of Jesus' life, especially how it ends – not only the cross and resurrection, but also His ongoing life and ministry in Luke's companion volume: the Book of Acts; how Jesus would be present and active in the words and deeds of Simon Peter, Andrew, James & John, and how He would continue to guide, govern, feed, and protect His holy Church on earth. To borrow Jesus' words from Matthew's Gospel: He *is* with us always, even to the close of the age.

It's in that sense, then, that we must hear and receive the Holy Gospel today. The Church continues to read these Gospel texts because we need to be reminded that the events recorded here are not just ancient history; the ongoing teaching and ministry of Christ is a very present reality here and now for you and me.

In this case, in particular, we know from the start that Simon will become Saint Peter the Apostle, that his ministry will continue the teaching that Jesus is the Word of God, and that this teaching has continued throughout the history of the Church in and through those who are called and ordained into the Office of the Holy Ministry, just as it is to this very day.

It's important, then, that we understand Simon Peter and his fellow Apostles properly – not just who they *were*, but especially who they would *become* "at the Word of Jesus."

Peter and his fishing partners would become "fishers of men." The initiative for making them so belongs entirely to Jesus. By the time He arrived on the scene, they'd already given up on the night's catch; they weren't even in their boats anymore.

So what is it that puts this event on a whole new trajectory? It's the presence of Jesus. The presence of Christ alone converts Peter's little fishing venture into a church, and becomes, as Luther likes to say, a little "ark of Christendom." As Jesus sits down and begins to teach from this humble little fishing boat, it becomes a mighty cathedral, from which the Word of God resounds throughout the world and across the ages. Peter's life is being radically changed as he sits and listens to Jesus. And so it is with the other future disciples. Jesus will later say to them, "You will be My witnesses from Jerusalem into all Judea, to Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth." From there it would become the global phenomenon that it is today. But this is where it all begins, from a fishing boat on the Lake of Gennesaret.

For it's here that Simon realizes and puts into words what all of us must recognize: All our toiling, all our labors, all our own efforts and striving, will produce nothing. Only at the Word of Jesus do we dare attempt anything at all; only by the Word of Jesus do we have any hope of success.

As fishers of men, apart from the Word of Jesus, the Apostles would haul in nothing but empty nets, and the Church itself would have remained barren. What an absolutely crucial thing this is for us to understand: We have nothing to go on – and nothing to offer – except the Word of Jesus.

As Pastor, as people, His Word in every case is our hope and salvation – even when it makes no sense to our (sinful) human reason.



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Like heading back out to fish in the middle of the day, after a long night with no success; to cast out the nets in the most unlikely place. Human reason expects nothing to come of such foolishness . . . for that's what it is in the eyes of the world. And Peter's ego as an experienced professional fisherman might well have said, "I know better than this Preacher what to do."

But instead, his faith says, "Okay. Let it be for me according to Your Word." And at the Word of Jesus . . . well . . . you heard what happened. The Apostles caught such a plethora of fish that their nets began to rip and tear. The Lord always provides far more than we could ever hope or expect or imagine.

It wasn't just Simon Peter, of course, that Jesus was calling to be a fisher of men, nor was it just his fishing partners. From the very start there would be others, twelve Apostles in all, the new Patriarchs of a new Israel. And in their footsteps would follow still others — not as Apostles, to be sure, but faithful Pastors who would serve as Ministers of Christ to His Church.

Simon Peter was key in this. You could hardly over-emphasize his importance for the life of the Church. But we need to realize that behind Peter is Jesus; alongside Peter are his fellow Apostles; and following after Peter are the Apostolic Ministers who continue to preach and teach the Word of Jesus, to baptize, absolve, and commune the congregations of His people all over the world (including even little Menasha, Wisconsin).

So it is at every level within the Church. None of us is called to "go it alone," or to do it all by ourselves. We're members of one Body in Christ, and each of us contributes to the whole in communion with all the others. Our sufficiency in all things is always Christ, who is with us Himself in His Word and Sacrament, and who supplies our need in whatever is lacking.

When we become aware of the true depth of this reality, we may be overcome by our own unworthiness — trust me! — especially in contrast to the divine Glory of Christ. As Simon Peter learned in our Gospel, much like Isaiah seven centuries earlier, we find every Epiphany of God to be a terrifying thing for us poor, miserable sinners. There can be no pride or boasting in His divine presence. Before Him, in the words of Martin Luther, "we are beggars, that is true."

What did Simon do when he recognized that Jesus is God? He prostrated Himself before Him. Indeed, what trembling and fear seized this sinful man! And how odd that we could be so cavalier about the real presence of the same Lord Jesus Christ, here among us!

Yet, in His tender mercy and compassion, the Lord God Almighty has not come among us in the flesh in order to punish us or judge us according to our sin. What did Jesus say to Peter? "Do not be afraid," granting Holy Absolution to Simon, as He now does for you through my lips.



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Look, the whole reason Jesus came, the reason He humbled Himself even to the point of death on the cross, is so that He might raise us up with His gracious forgiveness; that He might call us to be His own people, His Church; that He might feed us tenderly with His own precious and holy body and blood, and thereby share His own divine life with us in the flesh.

To receive His gifts of salvation in this way is what it means to be His disciples. And as He has made Himself known to us through the word of the apostles, as we have been caught in His nets, and as we have received all good things in heaven and on earth at His Word, so also does He now make Himself known to the world through us.

As the people of God, we've been given the blessed privilege of showing forth the praises of Him who has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light. Wherever He has put you in this world — whatever your vocation — He has re-created you in the waters of Holy Baptism to be an Epiphany of His divine Glory to others.

Now, that may mean — in fact, it certainly *will* mean — that you and I will live under His cross in this life. For His cross and passion, His suffering and death, remain the greatest revelation of His glory on earth. But precisely so, the cross you carry as a disciple of Jesus is one that will not destroy you; no, it will raise you up with Him in His resurrection unto everlasting life.

In the meantime, He feeds and strengthens you with the very body and blood He sacrificed for you on the cross — so that your own flesh and blood, no matter what they bear, will serve to the glory of His holy Name and for the benefit of your neighbor.

This life that you live, beloved, and these words that you speak — these are not of yourselves, but they are the very things you've received by the grace and charity of Jesus, who has made you His own; who has caught you in His nets, and who has taken you safely aboard the Holy Ark of Christendom. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen