

The Confounding Christ

Text: Luke 5:1-11

Theme: To follow Jesus is to embark on journey with the One who is an equal mixture of fear and fascination.

The longer I walk this path of being a Christian, even better, am a follower of the Way, the more I see that it all comes back to the person of Jesus Christ. How is it that I can have any assurance that there is a glorious life awaiting for me after death? Only because Jesus has gone before me having triumphed over death and promises that he has gone ahead to prepare a place for me. How can I make any sense of the madness of this world? Only because God has consigned Himself to this madness in the person of Jesus and bore the guilt of our insanity on the cross. How can I have any assurance that I will end up in the presence of the Holy God, knowing how far short I fall? Only because Jesus died for me when I was self absorbed and could have cared less.

But following Jesus is not just about future hope or even living sanely in the midst of this insanity, but actually pursuing Him as an apprentice now. It seems to me that the fullness of this Christian life has to do with keeping before us a picture of this One we follow. What is it that would compel us to follow him? How do we keep this relationship alive? If we are to call others to follow him, we must ourselves first be captivated by the person and power of Jesus Christ as a lifelong allure.

A relationship with Jesus, I believe, should come with equal amounts of fear and fascination. Can't live with Him; can't live without Him. As much as He affirms us, He disturbs us. As much as He gives us a singular focus, He complicates our decisions. His yoke is easy; but his way is hard. **He is the confounding Christ.** At the same time we are drawn magnetically to the irresistible Jesus, we find ourselves pushing him away because He shows us things about ourselves that are simply too uncomfortable to see.

In Luke 5:1-11 this push and pull of discipleship is illustrated dramatically in Peter and his companions' encounter with Christ. We will see how Jesus orchestrates the events in order to unnerve these mere mortals with his display of other worldly authority. Jesus enters the turf of these fishermen (Peter, James and John) and upsets their comfortable, predictable existence.

Read Luke 5:1-11

The backdrop against which Jesus unveils his identity can be quickly painted. Masses of people have converged on the shore of Lake Gennesaret (also

known the Sea of Galilee) to hear Jesus' message. The sheer physical press of the crowd forces Jesus to borrow Peter's boat, which He turns into a floating pulpit.

Upon completion of his teaching, Jesus proceeds to set Peter up with the command, "Put out into the deep water, and let down the nets for a catch" (Luke 5:4). Peter responds to this request with an exasperation born of exhaustion. He does not hide his irritation. "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything" (Luke 5:5). The Message: "Master, we've been fishing hard all night and haven't even caught a minnow." In addition to Peter's sheer tiredness, you get the impression that Peter thinks Jesus is just out of his element. Peter is a fisherman, who comes from a long line of fishermen. This was his profession. Jesus shows his ignorance of fishing by his request, "Put out into deep water..." Deep waters are for night fishing and are known to be unsuccessful during daylight. Peter perhaps was thinking, "Jesus, you stick to preaching, and let us handle the fishing."

Yet out of sheer reverence for the "Master", Peter accedes to the request. "But because you say so, I will let down the nets" (Luke 5:5b). Peter has sufficient respect to acquiesce, but he seems to have no expectation of success. Yet no sooner had the nets been lowered into the sea than it seemed that every fish within miles had decided their time had come. Peter signaled for his partners to join him in order to land this catch, and yet even with two boats the size of the haul threatened to sink them both.

Our interest here is Peter's reaction to the catch of fish, the likes of which he had never seen nor heard. If Peter had been selfishly focused solely on the financial success of this venture, he might have consulted a lawyer, drawn up a contract and tried to sign Jesus on as a full partner. Yet financial gain is nowhere to be found in Peter's consciousness.

This Jesus who confounds Peter is simultaneously disturbing and attractive. "When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, 'Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man'" (Luke 5:8). The Message: "Master, leave. I'm a sinner and can't handle this holiness. Leave me to myself." Peter is a conflicted man, experiencing what psychologists would label as "cognitive dissonance". Peter's word and actions collide. His life was a head on train wreck.

On the one hand, Peter appears to be magnetically drawn to Jesus. One can visualize Peter high stepping it through the waters, running toward this man who commands the seas to obey him. Peter falls on his knees at the feet of Jesus in an act of worship. He is drawn toward life. He never felt more vital than his did at that moment.

Yet at the same time, Peter intuitively knows he is in the presence of no mere mortal. He is experiencing an excruciatingly painful exposure. **“Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man.”** I don’t deserve to be in your presence, Peter is saying. Leave me, for I can’t seem to leave you.

I would submit that this push-pull, revulsion-attraction dynamic is the lifelong fascination that keeps us ever alive and under the formative power of Jesus Christ. This is why Jesus is like none other and is so compelling.

Let’s look more closely at what is going on with Peter.

1. Peter is repulsed by the presence of the Holy One of God.

What was Peter experiencing when he said, **“Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man”?** **“I’m a sinner and can’t handle this holiness.”** Peter had no category of human understanding in which to classify the person of Jesus Christ. He instinctively knew that this was no mere man. Somehow in a way that his mind would never be able to explain, the Holy One of Israel had embodied Himself in the person of Jesus. The normally hidden glory of God had for that moment been unveiled through a person and Peter was overwhelmed.

To experience the holiness of God is to come face to face with “overpoweringness”. Forces had been unleashed over which he had no control and they threatened to undo him. C. S. Lewis in the first of his space trilogies, *Out of the Silent Planet*, describes the feeling of Ransom when Oyarsa, the god figure, moved among his subjects, **“Ransom felt a tingling of his blood and pricking in his fingers as if lightning were near him; and his heart and body seemed like to him made of water.”**¹

This was Job’s experience, as well. We know the story of how Job lost everything—wealth, family and even health—because God allowed Satan to sift him. Job was reduced to a man scraping his open sores with dirty pieces of clay while his “friends” harassed him to confess his sin, as if this was the cause of his misfortune. The not-so-patient Job tenaciously held to his innocence. He dared even to accuse God of injustice claiming that he had done nothing to warrant this kind of treatment. God owed him an explanation. But nowhere does God give Job an intellectually satisfying answer for his condition. God simply breaks forth in power and pulls rank. Frederick Buechner has written, **“God doesn’t explain. He explodes. He asks Job who he thinks he is any way. He says to Job that to try to explain the kinds of things Job wants explained would be like trying to explain Einstein to a little necked clam. God doesn’t reveal his grand design. He reveals Himself.”**² (*Wishful Thinking*) **“Will the one who contends with the**

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*.

² Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*.

Almighty correct him?" says the Lord to Job (Job 40:1). Job is overwhelmed with God's revelation of Himself. "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5,6).

Like Job, Peter is overpowered. It is this "overpoweringness", the holiness of God that produced a sense of his moral corruption. "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man." But why this reaction? Why would Peter's focus be on his inner taintedness?

Pressed in upon Peter was the presence of the Holy. The word *holy* means "to cut or separate." This is an ancient form of our modern terminology "to be a cut above." In theological language we call this "transcendence", which means to exceed the usual limits. Jesus is the one who exceeds the usual limits, the cut above, the standard by which everything else is measured.

Up to this point, Peter was like most human beings, morally adrift and generally easy on themselves. We tend to grade our moral quality on a curve, not against an absolute scale. Sure we have our little foibles, bad habits, but doesn't everyone. We might say, certainly I am no saint, but I am generally a good sort of person. We make the assumption that God has the same complacency about our shortcomings, as we do.

Who is the most hated person in the classroom? Remember those impossible exams while you were in high school or college. You walked out of the exam saying, what did this have to do with anything we studied? It wasn't in my lecture notes? Couldn't find those answers in the text book. The only hope I have is that we all did equally bad and the professor grades on the curve. You are relieved to find out that this is exactly what the professor is going to do. So perhaps my 40% will squeak back after all. Then you hear the curve has been skewed, there was some brainiac who scored a 100 on that exam. Do you think the day that the graded exams were passed back that the class rose up and gave a resounding round of applause to the curve breaker? No, you sat there is resentment, knowing that for someone this test was conquerable. They set the standard.

For Peter his scale of measurement had been obliterated in a matter of moments. All of his fuzzyheaded, self justification now made no difference. He stood in the presence of absolute holiness. Jesus Christ was the curve breaker. Peter saw himself for the first time from the vantage point of the holiness of God.

Peter stood exposed. Most of us have the opportunity to minimize the pain of our sin because the revealing light of God's holiness exposes our darkness a bit at a time. But Peter went from the pitch black of a cave to the

piercing brilliance of an afternoon sun. He wanted to push Jesus away; the psychic throb was too great. And yet discipleship means to place ourselves under the gaze of God and to allow Him to expose our personal darkness. The good news, though, is that the very light that reveals the darkness also brings the warmth to provide the healing.

This is our experience of Jesus throughout our life. He keeps boring in. He won't let us off the hook. He keeps making us turn over the rocks and sees what crawls out.

On the one hand, Peter experienced Jesus as a disturbing, troubling, convicting purity who could see straight through to the depths of his soul. There was nothing to hide. "Depart from me..."

2. Peter is magnetically drawn to life-giving Jesus.

On the other hand, Peter's repulsion was only half the story. The other half of the story is that to be around Jesus is to be in the presence of one who is life itself. At the same time Peter was pleading for Jesus to leave, he was on his knees worshipping him. I envision Peter clutching onto Jesus' robe as if Peter is restraining his departure. As painful as this moment is, Peter does not want to be anywhere else. What a rush! He is a perfect mixture of fear and fascination. Isn't this similar to the powerful personalities we have encountered in life? They can be painfully irritating but they are so colorful that simply being around them makes you feel more alive.

Jesus had charisma. On the day when Peter's business had never been more successful, Jesus calls him away to follow him. The Scripture captures Peter and the others response, "For he and all his companions were *astonished* at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, 'Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men.' So they pulled their boats on shore, left everything and followed him" (Luke 5:9-11). The Message: "When they pulled in the catch of fish, awe overwhelmed Simon and everyone with him. It was the same with James and John, Zebedee's sons, coworkers with Simon. Jesus said to Simon, 'There is nothing to fear. From now on you'll be fishing for men and women.' They pulled up their boats up on the beach, left them, nets and all, and followed him."

There was such a compelling force, captivating aura about the person of Jesus that simply being associated with him was worth the loss of security. Peter now felt more alive around Jesus, than anyone he ever had or certainly would encounter.

After one of the hard teachings of Jesus, many who had followed him to that point began to fall away. The disciples themselves were saying, “This is a hard teaching, who can accept it” (John 6:60)? Seeing many fall away, Jesus turned to his disciples, “You do not want to leave too, do you?” (John 6:67)? It was Peter who spoke for the twelve, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:68, 69).

Part of the power of the draw of Jesus was his audacity to ask for a total commitment of their lives. Written into our hearts is the desire to find something worthy of the devotion of our entire energies. Jesus is so worth giving ourselves to that it will require the full development of our minds, the complete harnessing of our emotions, and the total discipline of our wills. Jesus himself promised that “he who loses his life for my sake, shall find it” (Luke 9:24).

Jesus called Peter and his fellow fishermen to a different kind of fishing business. “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will catch men” (Luke 5:10). Jesus was now giving them the opportunity to “catch alive” people and see the Lord redirect lives toward the God who was making Himself known in the person of Jesus.

None other than God in human form was enlisting them in service of the greatest enterprise on earth. J. I. Packer in *Knowing God* captures wonderfully the dignifying nature of this call. He tells us to imagine that we are given the opportunity of a lifetime to meet the one we would consider at the pinnacle—the cut above either in rank, intellectual power, professional skill, or personal sanctity. Pause and think of who that person might be for you. [For me, it would be an honor to meet someone like Billy Graham or Jimmy Carter. If you are in the computer world, perhaps Bill Gates. Perhaps it is one of the Good To Great level 5 leaders that Jim Collins references in his popular business book. Mother Teresa would be another.] Visualize yourself having a private audience with this one whom you would consider a lifetime honor to meet. The more you are consciously aware of your “inferiority”, the more you realize it is not your place to initiate or control the conversation, but allow it to be directed by this “exalted” person. If this figure kept the conversation on the level of courteous pleasantries, you might be disappointed, but you certainly couldn’t complain. You would still be able to have bragging rights about the time that you conversed with _____. But what if this person began to confide in you their deepest thoughts and concerns? In fact, they went beyond that and began to invite you to share in some particular undertaking they had planned; and asked if you might be available whenever they needed you. All of a sudden you find your head lifting, and chest swelling, and you feel alive like never before. Meaning and value have put zest into your step. You are a personal assistant to this great figure.

No wonder the disciples were drawn into this life. They were called to carry out the work of the King of the Universe who had traveled from eternity to time to establish his kingdom of earth. They were being asked to be on the ground floor. His life had become their life.

Peter and Us

Peter's experience of Jesus in Luke 5 is a model for us of what it means to be a disciple. First and foremost, we are to submit ourselves to the shaping influence of Jesus as his apprentice, which means to live in the constant life giving balance of fear and fascination. In my book *Discipleship Essentials*, I propose the following definition of a disciple: "A disciple is one who responds in faith and obedience to the gracious call of Jesus Christ. Being a disciple is a lifelong process of dying to self while allowing Jesus Christ to come alive in us."³

There are two daily moment by moment movements in a disciple's life. The first one is an expression of healthy fear before a holy God. "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts, see if there is any offensive way in me..." (Psalm 139:23, 24) With the journey inward we are inviting Jesus to take the search light of the Holy Spirit and root around in our souls and ferret out the darkness that holds on tenaciously. The fascinating thing is that the nearer we are drawn to the light of God's love and the more we passionately pursue a relationship with the living Christ, the more we become aware of how far we have to go. This has been the testimony of the saints down through the ages.

At the same time, we are called into the life and work that Jesus has for us. Dallas Willard writes, "A disciple of Jesus is a person who is learning from him how to live their life in the Kingdom of God as he would live their life if he were they. A disciple is one who is with him learning to be like him."⁴

Jesus takes up residence in us. He cleans house over a lifetime, while at the same time making us fit for service in His kingdom. His work of renovation is never done. He draws us into meaningful servant life where His life is working through us and is always before us. Fear and fascination. It is at this juncture that we are truly alive.

Jesus is compelling and confounding because he is ever interesting, infuriating, engaging, troubling, challenging, but I assure you never dull. So I am

³ Greg Ogden. *Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building Your Life in Christ*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998, 24.

⁴ Dallas Willard, Unpublished Outline Notes. Oak Brook Conference on Ministry: Renovating the Heart, November, 2005.

asking you this morning: Who is Jesus to you now? What descriptive word or words would you use?

- Captivating
- Distant/Remote
- He is just there
- Needing greater knowledge
- Growing in appreciation
- Wanting to get closer
- Stunning
- Confusing
- Not sure what he requires of me
- The love of my life
- Compartmentalized
- An historical figure
- Compelling
- Worth dying for
- Other _____

C. S. Lewis understood this balance like few have, when he chose the image of a lion to represent the Christ figure in his series of children's stories known as *The Narnia Chronicles*. In the first book of this series, *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the four children stumble into the mythical land of Narnia that has fallen under the spell of the wicked witch. We pick up the story when Aslan, the Christ figure and liberator of the land of Narnia, is now on the move. The children are being prepared by Mr. and Mrs. Beaver to meet Aslan for the first time.

Lucy asks hesitantly, "Is—is he a man?"

"Aslan a man!" Mr. Beaver said sternly, "Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the Wood and the Son of the Great Emperor Beyond the Sea. Don't you know who is the King of the Beasts? Aslan is a lion—the Lion, the Great Lion."

"Ooh!" said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall be rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearies and make no mistake, if there is anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" asked Lucy.

"Safe?", said Mr. Beaver, "Who said anything about safe? Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

There you have the allure of discipleship in a nutshell. In following Jesus, he will keep messing with us. But does our body tingle around anyone else as it does with this one we follow? Where else would rather be than in the presence of this One who was unlike anyone else who has ever walked this earth?