

THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY, February 7, 2010



“Go Deep”

a sermon by the Rev. Warren L. Pittman

Text: Luke 5.1-11

(No, this is *not* a Super Bowl Sermon, despite what first may come to mind when you read the title.)

In my basement study at home, I’ve hung a painting that used to hang in my grandparents’ den. I know nothing about it other than that; I never asked anyone about the “Bloomster,” who signed it, about any “backstory” it might have, or whence it came into my grandparents’ possession.

I just know I always liked it, and when my grandmother died, I called “dibs” on it, and it finally found its way to Greensboro.

The painting depicts a three-masted, square-rigged ship making its way in the open sea on a brightly moon-lit night.

Now my idea of sailing is pretty much confined to sipping a rum punch while cruising along the coast of a Caribbean Island, leaving the little details of keeping the boat from sinking to an able-bodied crew, but I do like the painting.

Again, the ship, listing ever so slightly to port, is under almost full sail in an open sea. There is no sign of land, and a few stars are visible between the moonlit clouds.

Letting my mind drift a bit recently while looking at that ship, I thought of the crew steering by those stars, calculating the ship’s position against what charts they might have on board.

Charts. The word caught my ear, and then my imagination.

As I told you, I’m not a sailor. When I am travelling on my own, it’s on land, usually behind the wheel of a car, and even with the help today of a GPS unit, I find my way with the help of a **map**.

But **maps** are for us landlubbers: on the open waters, one uses a **chart**.

Maps are depictions of a visible terrain. They tell you about the mountain range up ahead, about the long, flat stretch of road you’ll be on for a while, and about the alternate routes you can follow to get you from point A to point B.

Properly reading a map means laying it out flat, with the north edge of the map facing north, so that you can locate all the land-marks and best find your way to your destination.

Let's see: to get from here to Atlanta, I go down Groometown Road, turn right onto I-85 South and ... Atlanta. Or for a little adventure, I could try to trace old route 29, the Seminole Highway, which might require a *couple* of maps both to find it and to follow it!

But there's a lot more to reading a *chart* than there is to reading a map. I could easily draw a "map" of, say, most of the Pacific Ocean between San Francisco and Hawaii. It would be a solid sea-blue sheet of paper, because as far as *maps* go, pretty much all that lies between San Francisco and Hawaii is water.

It really wouldn't matter if you laid out my *map* with north facing north or north facing south: it would still be "*water, water, everywhere, and not a drop to drink.*"

What's needed at sea is a *chart*, the kind of documents that offers the sailor important information about a lot of things one *cannot* see.

Charts from the days when "tall ships" were the state-of-the-art, include with the usual depth soundings, navigational notes about currents, and warnings about dangerous waters.

But they rarely, if ever, plotted an exact route for a sailor to follow; each time out of port a new course had to be plotted, because a good sailor knew – and still knows – that each voyage is unique.

All of that came back to mind this past week as I read again the call Jesus gives his first disciples in the version of God's Good News Luke offers us this morning.

No, it's not the familiar, "*Follow me*" call, but the call to "*Go deep.*"

"Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."

When you get serious about Bible study, you have to slow down and ponder what might lie behind the variety of ways in which stories are told. There was a reason that the church discerned a need to have *four* versions of the one Holy Gospel, and a reason that the church decided not to smooth out the discrepancies among those four versions.

And today gives us a perfect case study: we're rather used to the way Mark and Matthew write about Jesus walking along the lakeshore, picking up Simon and Andrew, James and John along the way.

But Luke tells this unique story about Jesus' borrowing his buddy Simon's boat for a pulpit, and then telling him and his partners to "*Go deep, and cast your nets,*" resulting in a catch that nearly floods the boat.

When they get back to shore, Simon, James and John are disciples, ready to start netting people. (I wonder if our friends up at Saint Andrew's might not be a little miffed this morning as Luke makes *no* mention their patron saint!)

What Luke offers us is not only a story about the first disciples' call, but also a story about *discipleship*, all with the twist given the tale in having Jesus step off the land and onto the water with those whom he will soon ask to follow him.

Before that invitation, he tells them to move farther from the shore, to "*Go deep*" out onto the lake, away from the familiar shoreline and the almost map-able shallows onto the waters beneath which they cannot clearly see.

This is the start of their ministry together, and it gives them, and us, a clue as to what ministry with Jesus truly is.

As much as we'd like this life of discipleship to be a "journey" – and we often refer to it as such – today I hear Luke telling me that it is more of a "voyage," and there is no set "map" for us clearly to follow.

The disciples put out, to borrow a title from the late author Patrick O'Brian, with a true "*Master and Commander*" who would be guiding them through those, and more, even deeper waters. (What's that lyric from Leonard Cohen? "*And Jesus was a sailor.*")

John, James, Simon Peter and the rest gradually learned spiritual seamanship from their Lord, and were then able to leave what are now centuries-old "charts" of those deep waters, charts to which generations of other sailors and navigators have added their symbols and notations.

Today *we* have those charts – scriptures, sermons, stories of saints and other spiritual seafarers. And they're not detailed maps clearly defining the path we have to follow, but **charts** – charts of the "deep waters"; charts filled with their navigational notes, experiences and insights; charts of the "deep waters" into which we, like them, are called to "put out"; charts of the "deep waters" through which *we* are called to plot *our* life's course.

AMEN.