

“Something Smells Fishy”

Big Buts in the Bible – part #3

Judges 6:1-24

Today is the third message in our series, “Big Buts in the Bible.” That’s B-U-T-S, as in, excuses. All of us have made excuses before to get out of something we didn’t want to do or didn’t think we could do. However, the Bible records many stories of people who made excuses to God and discovered that despite their fears, or feelings of inadequacy, God did in fact use them for great purposes. After hearing their stories, we should all find that we don’t need to make excuses to God anymore. Instead, we can say “Yes” and discover the joy of obedience, as we watch God do great things through us.

So far, we have met Moses, the wandering, stuttering, murdering shepherd, whom God used in mighty ways to save his people from Egypt. We also followed Gideon, the small, hesitant warrior who fought a battle with only 300 soldiers and won, thanks to God’s intervention. Today we look at one of my favorite disciples, Peter.

As we read in the scripture just now, Peter was a fisherman. Probably some of you are fishermen (or fisherwomen) too. I like to go fishing with my dad occasionally. So tell me, what is one thing that fishermen are notorious for? Exaggerating. Lying. Here is a picture of the biggest fish I’ve ever caught. But you might guess that the size of that fish has grown substantially since I caught it. Here are some sayings I found about fishermen recently.

“All fishermen are liars, except you and me. (And I’m not so sure about you.)”

“We ask a simple question, and that is all we wish: Are fishermen all liars? Or do only liars fish?”

“Nothing makes a fish bigger than almost being caught.”

Fishermen are not often welcome in polite company, as evidenced by this saying: “Give a man a fish and he has food for a day. Teach him how to fish and you can get rid of him for the entire weekend.”

So here is the strange thing I find in today’s scripture. Peter, the fisherman, actually told the truth! Peter’s excuse for not following Jesus was this: “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” That’s a strange thing for anyone to say, especially a fisherman, even though it is true. Why would Peter say that, and why did Jesus respond the way he did? That’s what I want to answer today.

This was not Peter’s first encounter with Jesus. Actually, if you go back just one chapter, you find Jesus at Peter’s home, healing Peter’s mother-in-law. (Luke 4) It seems that Peter knew a little of who Jesus was. Peter sensed there was something different about this rabbi. And Peter was probably politely keeping his distance. It certainly seems that Peter did not think he was worthy to be in the presence of Jesus.

You should know that fishing was not a lucrative career in those days. Fisherman were low on the totem pole, so to speak. They probably ranked right there with shepherds. These were day laborers, blue collar workers, who barely eked out a living. They fished naked, for crying out loud. Although James and John were well off enough to have extra boats and servants working for them, this was not a respectable job.

The job everyone wanted in those days was to be a disciple of a famous rabbi. The cream of the crop, the ones who earned respect and esteem in the

eyes of the people, were the students of the Pharisees and scribes. They were like the Rhode’s scholars, the pre-med and pre-law students of today.

We sense there is a separation between Peter and Jesus at first. Jesus, without any resistance, commandeers Peter’s boat so that Jesus can preach to the crowd from the water. Then, Jesus tells Peter to cast his nets again in deeper water, even though all night they had caught nothing. Notice how Peter defers to Jesus, even though Jesus is clearly not a fisherman. “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.” (verse 5)

Peter refers to Jesus as Master. And Peter submits, even though he thinks it will bring nothing, except maybe embarrassment to the fishermen and even Jesus himself.

The result, however, is astounding. A large catch of fish so great, the nets start to tear and the boat starts to sink. Come on, if that’s not a fishy story, I’ve never heard one. However, this is the Bible we are reading here. It truly is a miracle. When Peter recognizes that the very power of God is present, he is overcome with remorse and begs Jesus to go away.

When confronted by the awesome holiness of God Almighty, Peter is ashamed. He feels inadequate. He cannot hide, so he gives his best excuse to Jesus. “I am a sinful man.” (verse 8) A wretch. Scum. Lord, I have nothing to offer you but brokenness and shame. Please, go away.

How does Jesus respond? Jesus does not deny that Peter is sinful. Jesus knows the truth. But in a few simple words, Jesus reassures Peter and calls him to a greater purpose than Peter has ever known before.

“Do not be afraid. From now on, you will fish for people.” (verse 10)

This seems to be not only a pronouncement of peace, but also forgiveness. It is also a calling. Although not phrased as a question, it is nonetheless a statement that requires a response. Peter is freed from his past, but what will he do? Jesus has answered Peter’s excuse. Will Peter take the next step?

He does. “So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.” (verse 11) “They”, plural. Peter, James, and John. But clearly the emphasis is on Peter, who does respond to the grace of Christ.

What does it mean that they left everything? Maybe a handful of fishing poles and few boats doesn’t seem like much to us. The Abingdon New Testament Commentary explains it this way:

“Leaving everything” means leaving the family (cf. 14:26) and leaving one’s means of support. The family was the primary producing unit in antiquity. Whatever economic security there was came through the family. In leaving their families these men were abandoning family responsibilities and their own security.” (ANTC, Luke.)

By contrast, in our society, we stress individualism. I could say that I “left everything” to go to college, or to become a pastor. Yet no one calls me radical. Not so for Peter. He was leaving behind the only life he had ever known. Maybe the only career anyone in his family had ever worked. He was leaving behind home, family, stability, and more, just to follow a wandering rabbi. Why? Certainly the allure of being a disciple might have been a part of it. But more likely, Peter felt the power of Jesus’ presence and irresistible grace.

Think of all the places that Jesus took Peter. For three years, Jesus walked the country, performing miracles, teaching radical sermons. The whole while, the disciples had to rely on others to meet their needs. Peter saw incredible signs, like Moses and Elijah on the mountain top, a crowd of 5,000 fed with a few loaves

and fish. Peter watched as the Jewish leaders arrested Jesus, and the Romans crucified him. Peter witnessed the resurrection. All in three short years. Not bad for a smelly, unworthy, sinful, doubtful fisherman.

Our trouble today, as I see it, is one of two things. Either people think they're so bad, so sinful, so broken, that God would not even want to use them for great purposes; or people think they are so good that they don't need God at all. Both of these lines of reasoning are disputed by this story.

One might say, "But we are talking about the Apostle Peter here! How could I possibly compare to the one who received the keys to the kingdom of heaven?" (Matt 16:19) Before you start comparing yourself to Peter, let me remind of a few other things Peter did besides trying to say, "But, God!"

Peter told Jesus not to go and get himself killed. (Matthew 16:22) Peter cut off a servant's ear in the garden. (John 18:10) Peter denied Jesus three times. (Luke 22:54-62) However, Peter was also the only disciple to walk on water. (Matt 14:29) He was one brave enough to say, out loud, "Jesus, you are the Messiah, the Son of God." (Matt 16:16) No, Peter was not perfect. We know he made lots of mistakes. But God also did great things in Peter's life.

God does not demand perfection from us. Only God is perfect. What God asks for is obedience, the willingness to trust him. Isn't it interesting how often God, or Jesus, or an angel, has to say to someone, "Don't be afraid"? We have to remind ourselves, like Peter, not to be afraid of who we are, what we've done, or what we think we cannot do. We must not be afraid of failure, for God promises to always be with us. (Matt 28:20) Jesus says to Peter, and all of us, "Let me be your Master. Let my life cover your sin. Let me do something amazing,

something you’ve never imagined. Let’s fish for people.” The miracle foreshadows what Peter will do for the rest of his life.

Peter tried to say no, that he was too smelly. But Jesus knew better. Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves.

Like Peter, we need God to bring our sin into light. We need to have that feeling of unworthiness, that conviction in our hearts, that we are sinful. We cannot compare to a holy God. Perhaps our issue is that, unlike Peter, we still think that we are somehow “good enough.” We trip over our own pride, and we fail to give up everything to follow Jesus because we are barely satisfied with our own lives.

Perhaps the danger lies in our thinking, “Well, Jesus loves me, Jesus forgives me and accepts me. My work is done here.” If so, we miss the whole point of the gospel. Jesus does not save us so we can quietly continue our old ways. Jesus saves us for his kingdom. The disciples left everything. What about you? Will you follow him, forsaking all others, leaving your old life behind? The call to discipleship takes many forms, but God certainly calls those to abandon all for the sake of the gospel. What have you given up? Have you given your family to God? Do you let God control every aspect of your life? Your words? Your time? Your finances? Your service?

The Bible tells us in Acts that Peter was arrested and beaten several times. Tradition informs us that Peter was finally crucified, upside down, because he felt unworthy of imitating his Lord. Peter, and all his fishermen brothers, and many of Jesus’ future followers, both men and women, gave up everything, even their lives, to follow Christ. What about you? If Christianity were illegal, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

Jesus made it clear. “Those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.” (Luke 14:33) “Whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:27)

The smelly, unworthy fishermen answered the call, and in giving up everything, they found their lives again. I pray that your answer would be the same. May the power of Christ both startle you and reveal your sin, and reassure you that Christ has a purpose for your life that is greater than anything you could ever imagine. Amen.