

Sermon for 5th Sunday after Epiphany, Year C, Gospel Text: Luke 5:1-11

New Nets by Rev. Ingrid Chenoweth

I'd like to challenge you this morning, just for a moment, to be as still as you can. Sit perfectly still for ten seconds. Ready? Let's try it.

How did you do? Do you think you were able to be perfectly still? Even though it seems that way, in reality, during that ten seconds, we've traveled at least 1367 miles. While we sit here in what seems an unmoving environment, the earth is rotating on its axis at about 1000 mph. The earth is also orbiting the sun at a whopping 67,000 mph. Even our milky way galaxy is spinning, and space itself is expanding. We think we're sitting still in space but that's just an illusion. Even when we think that nothing's changing, everything's changing around us all the time. The world around us is in constant motion and undergoing constant change.

Imagine Simon and his brother and their friends James and John washing out their nets as Luke describes the scene. They're bent over, intent on their task of picking out seaweed and twigs from the strands of the net, disappointed that after a whole night of fishing they've come back empty-handed. Meanwhile, their world is undergoing a cosmic-level shift. Jesus, God in the flesh, is teaching about the arrival of the Kingdom of God. Fish are schooling out in the lake in such numbers that when Simon and the others cast their nets again they'll be stretched and nearly broken. The whole of creation is being reconciled to God and death will soon be defeated, when Jesus is crucified and raised on the third day. Simon, whom Jesus will rename Peter, has already been chosen to be the foundation of a new Spirit-powered community that will spread the Gospel into all the known world. But, bent over under the hot sun, Simon and the others have no idea that the world has shifted under their feet. They don't realize anything's different until Jesus tells them to go out again, and cast their nets in the deep water.

Those fishermen, who probably thought they'd seen everything, weren't prepared for what happened next. Their jaws dropped with astonishment at the teeming silver fish filling the nets, water being splashed into a white froth by the multitude of fish as they are drawn up. The linen fibers of the nets are stretched taut under the weight of all those fish. Simon and his brother lean far over the side of their boat, shoulders and arms straining as they tried to pull their nets in.

We can imagine Simon holding on for dear life to the net, looking down where his hands gripped it. The fibers wrapped around his fingers were beginning to fray and to break. "Quick! Come help us pull this in," he shouted to their partners James and John in the other boat. They pulled their boat alongside and jumped in with Simon and his brother, and together they were able to pull in the heavy nets. The fish glistened in the sun as they spilled around their feet, as the men lowered their nets into the water and drew them in, again and again. Perhaps Simon thought to himself, "These old nets won't do for these new catches of fish, the ones that Jesus makes happen."

When our old nets aren't quite up to the new thing God is doing in our midst, God challenges us to let the Holy Spirit to create new nets. New ways of allowing people to make connections with one another and with God.

A beautiful little church with a small but strong congregation had to let this kind of transformation happen for them. The church is located in a vibrant small town with a growing arts community. The congregation had been getting smaller; it had lost some members after a disagreement and was also losing folks as they passed away or became homebound because of illness or falls. The congregation was getting anxious about whether it would be able to survive. That anxiety led some to resist the idea of change; they were fearful that any change would cause even more of their members to stop coming.

But others began to be aware that God was changing things all around them, and they wondered how they might be faithful to meet the needs

of the new folks moving into the church's neighborhood. The new folks weren't people who had been raised in the church. But, like the people on that Galilean lakeshore, they were hungry to have an encounter with God. They were hungry to hear some good news for their lives.

So, one member of that little hillside church had the idea of starting an informal evening service, led by the pastor sometimes and by lay leaders at other times. A couple of bluegrass musicians said they could help lead worship. Other members emphasized the importance of eating together as a way to create community, and so it was decided that this service would always be followed by supper and fellowship.

With lots of prayer and discussion and hard work, that little congregation wove new nets strong and flexible enough to handle their new circumstances. The evening service they created felt welcoming to the new folks in that neighborhood. Eventually more people were coming to the evening church service than the morning one, and that evening group created hope and brought new life to the little church on the hillside.

What are the nets we have relied on, that might no longer be able to handle the new circumstances in which we find ourselves? Nets that are becoming inflexible and weak? God is doing a new thing, already at work under the surface of the waters that surround us in ways we don't know or understand yet. May God challenge this community of faith to allow the Spirit to weave new nets for us, so that we might allow the Spirit to create new connections here in this place. Amen.