

Sermon: Year C, 5 Epiphany  
Texts: Judges 6:11-24a  
I Corinthians 15:1-11  
Luke 5:1-11

Earlier this week I happened upon a statement made by Nicholas Lash, one of the finest theologians presently working in England. In finishing a short exposition on one portion of the Apostles' Creed, he drew this striking conclusion: in the light of the work of God in Jesus Christ, he said, "there is no [longer any] circumstance that justifies despair."

"There is no [longer any] circumstance that justifies despair." If you pause long enough to imagine, with any kind of thoroughness, what this assertion means, it's either courageous and bold, or it's appallingly callous. If we truly believe what we say, if our faith has merit, then there is no room for despair at all, neither in the vague, colossal terms of world events nor in the many smaller ways, intimate and close, that it threatens and plagues each of us. It has been made illegitimate – false in its resignation, false in its leading into misery, false in its collapsing into despondency. This is a statement that can't be passed by lightly; it leaves none of us untouched.

In concluding this, Lash does not say that despair disappears or ceases to occur. We all have our individual moments. Communities suffer tragedies, often suddenly, without time to prepare. And we are all caught up in the long march of struggles we have simply inherited, the conflicts of differences established by place and time, the many imbalances and tensions of the history we are extending. What he does say, however, with the strength of declaration, is that even in the midst of all its turbulence and fears, we have been given freedom from despair's downward pull – no matter the severity of the conditions we endure. He does not mean, either, by naming this freedom that it is merely a form of evasion. We are not granted license to be blithely indifferent, as if despair could be eliminated by repeatedly choosing to turn a blind eye toward those things that undo us. Rather and profoundly, we have been given the opportunity to see everything, without exception, but always through the distinctive lens of God's unflagging and limitless power, whose whole work is creation, abundant grace, and restoration.

This is the instruction of the creed. This, and this alone, is the indefatigable trust of Christianity: creation, abundance, and restoration. All else is ephemera. And all deviations from this upward thrust, even those doctrines sometimes advocated by the Church itself, presenting God as vindictive and inevitably condemning, are misconstrued. For if all despair has been overwhelmed by the light of God's glory shared with us, then every evil that leads to darkness has been vanquished too. And the very nature of God's judgment shifts from denunciation to mercy and benevolence, without exception. This is our real news. This great reversal in the movement of life is our essential message.

The story we have heard this morning from Luke's Gospel models this beautifully. We are told that crowds have excitedly gathered around Jesus to hear what he has to say. In order to avoid the crush of the people, he steps into a nearby boat to teach, and when he is finished, he instructs Simon and his crew to put out into deeper waters. Luke does not tell us what Jesus had said to the crowds, but what follows, afterward, is not merely another incident. The structure of the story suggests that it is the matching of Jesus' teaching with acts that bear out its truth. His words come to fruition in event. They are proved materially.

At Jesus' request, Simon responds, however, first voicing his objection, complaining that he and the rest of the fishermen are all tired. They have been working throughout the night, and nothing came from all their labor. Their nets are empty. They have little energy for this exercise and even less desire. By their protest they show their weariness. Despair looms like

a shadow. This venture, they contend, like the hours already wasted, will come to nothing. Experience has hardened their conviction in this.

Nonetheless, they comply, and with stunning immediacy, their nets are filled to bursting with fish. Now we must be careful here, for we will miss the point if we get sidetracked by arguing the plausibility of miracles or whether, in fact, with a snap of his fingers, Jesus did something magical or outlandish. This interpretation tends to trap us within the realm of our own doubts, by our own lights determining that nature's course can't really be so conveniently interrupted. What is primary, however, isn't a tall tale of interruption. It is rather Jesus' confirmation that the created world doesn't stand alone, independently; it is, rather, first and always, the ongoing work of God, and God's desire is the flourishing of all creation. When the nets are raised, Simon is not humbled because Jesus pulled a rabbit from a hat. What he discerns is that the very Lord of all creation is standing with him, and Jesus' Lordship is made evident in the profusion of fish that has been caught. Simon had protested that there would be none. But none is not the word of God. God's word is promise, as he had said to Abraham, more than can be counted, more than can be contained.

This is followed then by two direct statements made by Jesus to the fishermen. The first we hardly notice or remember, even though it is of supreme importance. They are told not to be afraid. The power of God, said Jesus, is not unleashed as, so often, ours is, bent toward domination, forcing submission. God's power lifts creation in assurance. His word is not menacing but is directed to providence and mercy. No sentence in all the Gospels is as often repeated as this is. We have no reason to fear. We have no right to instill fear. We will not be abandoned. Yet this is the promise probably least heard, least practiced, and least embraced. Its generosity exceeds our capacity to accept or believe. But this makes it no less true.

Jesus' second statement is the one more quoted, and famously, it has been understood as the principal charge of evangelism. Following in the way of the disciples, as fishers of men we are commanded to save the souls of others by catching them up in the sheer impressiveness of our awesome, miraculous God. But this impulse isn't quite right, either. For quickly the task degenerates into division and threat, and, as strident voices shout, getting anything wrong brings dire consequences. This ignores, however, the entire thrust of the story. The promise is not threat. It is liberation from all dread, which is extended to all persons. Our real fate is this freedom, both radical and sure. Our commission is the invitation of God to thrive in the joy of knowing that despair has lost all its substance and weight. By God's determination, creation, abundance, and reconciliation are the words that circumscribe all reality. And no circumstances, however desolate, can negate this.

"There is no [longer any] circumstance that justifies despair." If you want just one statement that defines the church, it is this. We are, at heart, not just an institution, one more non-profit, charitable organization among many that is dedicated to good works. More sublimely, we are the people of God who, individually and collectively, choose to consciously embody the fullness of this singular conviction.

Now, some might be inclined to say in its stead, as if more positively, that hope springs eternal. But this offers far too little – maybe only a glimmer of light set against an onslaught of darkness. Lash's summary is more emphatic, and it is more thrilling. It declares without apology that there is no evil, large or small, that will not be completely bested by God's creative redemption. And how might the world be different if we were visibly resolute in just this one contention?

We will be fishers of men when, encountering us, people of all sorts and conditions will be able to see in us this bold gladness and freedom. That task never diminishes. It is never

done. But it is the truth of the world; it is the grace of God; and it is the immeasurable beauty available to us in our lives, which, by our choosing, we may magnify, in creativity, abundance, and eager restoration.

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