

Gates Presbyterian Church *When the Nets Tear* February 9, 2025 Epiphany 5C

As we begin this morning, I want to invite you to cast your mind back to a couple of weeks before Christmas when the children's pageant was beginning. Claudia shared with us that the pageant had been rehearsed **thoroughly** - - for at least five minutes.

So it was going to be raw and real.

This sermon is going to be the same way.

When you are a pastor, your job looks different every day. Usually, I protect my writing and worship preparation time pretty fiercely, but sometimes, other needs take priority and my time rearranges itself at the expense of my usual practices. That is what happened this week.

In such times, I find deep joy in showing up for the tasks God sets before me instead. It has been a rich week. A full week. A heartbreaking week. A week that reminded me how thankful I am for all of you. How thankful I am that I get to do this work. How thankful I am that people trust me enough to share their lives with me, not just the joys and celebrations but the sorrows and the brokenness too.

This week, as I traveled from one place to another, sitting with someone whose life is being cut short by a merciless disease; responding to people's fears as the world around them is rocked by change; listening to the pain that comes with loss; I have been thinking about our gospel reading for this morning; thinking about those nets, straining with fish and breaking with the weight of the harvest.

Jesus tells the disciples that they will be fishers of men. He shows them that following his directions about where to fish will produce an enormous harvest, even in places where they have already looked and believe there is nothing to be found.

I have been thinking about how the nets we cast as followers of Jesus are nets made entirely of love. We cast them as far and as wide as we can and, sometimes, when we pull them in, we find that we have caught a harvest that overflows with pain and suffering and brokenness.

This week has felt like that to me. The fish we are finding in the nets we cast right now are suffering neighbors – so weighty in their pain that the nets are tearing, so many that we are overwhelmed, a terrible, beautiful mass of humanity – each soul unique and deeply loved, each bearing a terrible weight of suffering.

What are we to do with such harvests?

What do we do when our hearts just keep breaking and we feel overwhelmed by what we see.

How are we to sort these fish one by one with care and concern and make sure that we treat each as it ought to be treated.

How do we mourn the ones who don't make it?

How do we deal with the inevitable distress of not being able to help all the ones God has directed into our nets?

How do we understand where God could possibly be in all this and what the Spirit might be calling us to be and do in response to such a harvest of suffering?

First, I think we must remember that God's abundance continues to flow even in the midst of this pain and suffering. It flows in the love we feel welling up in our hearts when we hear stories of pain. It flows in the hands that are raised when God asks, who will go for us and whom shall I send? It flows in the unexpected energy we find just at the moment we think we cannot continue.

We must trust that God will provide what we need when we need it. We must walk away from the world's bounty and all its ideas about fish that are just fish – or people that matter only as the numbers they represent on a balance sheet. We must embrace the idea that every fish, every person, has been made beautifully in God's image and must be deeply valued by the whole community.

What does it mean to be fishers of people, then, in our time and place?

I'm sure you will be surprised to hear that my answer is the same one as I had last week and the week before and the week before that. To be fishers of people is to love – extravagantly, relentlessly, completely.

To love, by showing up in places of pain to sit there, whether we know what to do or not. To love, by putting our bodies and our bank accounts where our words lie and working to protect the vulnerable among us who have become targets of those exercising power without compassion.

This week, I have seen pain in the microcosm of a single person's life coming to an abrupt end, in the deep loss of the community surrounding them, and the profound sadness of so much missed opportunity, so much never to be experienced life.

I have seen pain in the middle ground of a community living in fear of deportation, the uncertainty and worry over how to get to work or school, the fear of being picked up even

when they have papers showing their right to be here, the anguish over a loved one's disappearance.

I have seen pain in the macro level of funding for children's cancers that has been cut, in the studies that will be left unfinished and the lives these researchers know will be impacted as a result.

I have seen pain at the global level as suggestions are made to turn the site of a genocide into a playground for those lucky enough to afford a fancy vacation, all at the cost of displacing millions who still long to call this place home – a place their families have lived in for generations.

There is much out there to discourage us. Much to make us question whether God still shows up. And into this space, comes Isaiah's story from this morning, his call coming in the midst of his own peoples' experience of being overcome by a hostile power that destroys their city and their houses of worship and sends them into exile in another land.

I find myself wondering, "What does it mean, to be, like Isaiah, a speaker of prophetic truth when the world seems to be descending into chaos?"

In the second half of our Old Testament reading this morning, verses that are optional in the lectionary text, God tells Isaiah to speak to the people:

Keep listening, but do not comprehend;
keep looking, but do not understand.'

¹⁰ Make the mind of this people dull,
and stop their ears,
and shut their eyes,
so that they may not look with their eyes
and listen with their ears
and comprehend with their minds
and turn and be healed."

Why would God call Isaiah just to say such a thing? We decided as we reflected on this in Bible study that perhaps God wants to simply tell the people what God sees – that these verses are merely descriptive – not a threat of what will come but a comment on the actual reality that God witnesses.

I can't help but feel that such descriptions speak to us today too.

That too many of us listen but do not comprehend, look but do not understand. At the end of the day, I think we can know whether we are following Jesus, becoming fishers of people, or participating in the world Isaiah describes, by looking to see whether harm comes to those whose lives we touch.

Do the words we offer bring comfort and compassion?

Do the things we do bring healing and encouragement?

Do the prayers we pray ask for wholeness and reconciliation?

My friends, the harvest is great right now. The nets we need to cast are long and wide and created from strands of love each of us must contribute to their making. The people who will swim into these nets need our love, our courage, our energy, our imagination, our best effort.

Now is the time to drop the nets the world entices us to rely on, to abandon the wealth the world insists offers security and status, to denounce the measures that the world claims will show us who matters. Now is the time to work together to create vast nets of love and compassion, to haul their contents into God's new creation and to do all we can to offer each one the wholeness and healing God desires for the entire world.

Let us be about the work together. In hope and faith and love.