

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Word of God who transforms our lives, amen.

It was during worship that Sunday in the winter of 1997-1998. I remember it so clearly. I thought I was there to give my praise to God. It was about me fulfilling my obligation and serving God by just being there... That's what I thought... Evidently God had other plans. It wasn't this fishing story, but the similar one in John's Gospel where Jesus tells Peter to cast his net on the right side of the boat. After a night of fishing, but no catching, the fisherman hauled in a great load of delicious seafood. The pastor made the point that if we're not feeling fulfilled or satisfied, or if you don't seem to have a purpose in life, maybe you should your cast the net where Jesus says. I heard God's irresistible call on my life that morning and it transformed me and completely changed my life. At that moment the pastor was no longer speaking. I distinctly heard the voice of Jesus calling my name and asking me to follow Him. Crazy or what? Does the Word of God still speak to people today? I know my answer...

The life-altering power of God's word—spoken, heard, and heeded—is dynamically evident in this story of the call of Peter, James, and John. The church has claimed from the beginning that the Word spoken at creation, the Word that became incarnate, is the same Word of God spoken through the Holy Spirit today and throughout history. “God said” and there was light and all creation. “God

spoke” and Moses led the people of Israel out of bondage. “The word of the Lord” came to the prophets and prompted them to call the people to repentance. “A voice from heaven” proclaimed the Beloved Son on whom God’s favor rests.

Before Jesus’ call to Simon, James, and John; before their fish-laden boats groaned toward land, the appeal of Jesus, the incarnation of the Word of God brought the people to the lakeshore. Remember, there were no PA systems, no amplifiers, and not even a blow horn invented yet, so the people, eager to hear what Jesus had to say pressed in, close to him. So close Jesus had to get into a boat and put out a small distance, so he could continue to speak and teach. His recent healing of the possessed man in Capernaum amazed the people and drove them to ask “what is there in this man’s words?” What set Jesus’ words apart? In Capernaum he had “astounded” the people “because he spoke with authority”. From town to town and in the synagogues of Judea the people were given hope because Jesus proclaimed the “good news of the kingdom of God”. The reports of the healing power of the Word that cured Simon’s mother-in-law and many others compelled the crowd to the water’s edge to hear, to listen.

God’s word lived among them. In this account the call of Peter, James, and John, God moves again, as God had moved previously among and with the people of Israel, toward new God breathed futures. Here God moves again; here God’s anointed one, Jesus Christ reveals and lives and makes real God’s Word for the

people to hear and see and experience. The Word comes to dwell in the midst of every day lives of fishermen, teachers, nurses, farmers, retirees. It reaches out to call every person on planet earth, and even one airman, living in Alaska who was struggling to see his purpose in God's Kingdom.

The word begins to move outward and outbound from Jesus. It falls on the ears of crowds hungry for hope and good news; it falls on the ears of Simon and James and John who were afraid, amazed, attracted, and ready. Not knowing what lay ahead on that uncharted journey from their familiar fishing boats, "they left everything and followed him," captured by a Word of God that they would, in turn, carry on among people waiting for it, listening for it, hoping for it, and ultimately trusting all to it.

God's living word cuts through the din of pressing crowds and the lives and labors of everyday people. It shapes the sweep of the human story. It alters the lives of those who hear and heed. Even the life of one Major Mel Musser. What a terrifying experience to hear Jesus call directly to you! How can I do what you ask Lord? I'm such a bad sinful person. I've messed up so many things I tried and yet you call me? What about this family? What about the responsibilities I have in serving my country. But if you say so Lord I'll put out into the deeper water and do what you tell me... God's living word cuts through daily life with the gift of freedom—the radical, freedom that enables one to leave everything and follow.

God's living word draws people in, nourishes them, and then sends them out. It's like breathing... It calls, it gathers, it nourishes us and then it pushes us out. It pushes us out, into the world to serve God by living for our neighbors. Simon and James and John could scarcely believe their net-bulging catch from deep, but empty waters. They were amazed and afraid. The word came to them, captured them. They left boats and nets. They left the old way and followed Jesus.

Heard and seen and heeded, God's living word demands our decision—it lays upon us the choice of staying on the boat or leaving everything and following, of moving through that transformative moment to the fullness of life, when ears and eyes and hearts are truly opened and we cannot turn back. For followers of the living word, life is never and can never be the same. It is altered forever.

Hearing the living word is not enough—acting upon it fulfills the call. It's both invitation and demand. Hearing and acting upon the living word is not simply about “catching others.” Call has consequences. Following has price. As we see in this story of the call of Simon, James, and John. They and the whole crowd heard the same living Word of God that day, yet the pressing crowds dissipated, and Jesus and only his first three followers began their journey from the lakeshore to the cities and countryside and to the Cross. As that journey unfolded, it slowly became clearer to Simon, James, and John that the living Word with whom they walked was indeed the living Child of the God who had created the world they

traveled and the people they met along the way. This was the same God who came to Abraham and Sarah, to Moses and Esther, to the prophets and the people of Israel. This was the same God who had now become flesh and was leading them away from their boats, away from their livelihoods, and into a journey of faith where they had nothing, but their trust in this Man from Galilee...

God's word is like that—in the past, the present, the future. We live in a time where mass communication and the connectedness of the internet and social media create a deafening echo chamber. It's difficult to hear the word, or to see it made manifest in movement or miracle. The crowds don't always press eagerly in to hear and almost never act. Lives, nations, and cultures seem empty. The workers are not always ready to leave everything and follow Jesus to the ends of the earth, or even into the neighborhood. Even we who proclaim the word do not always believe fully in its power. We ourselves are not free of clogged ears or closed hearts, and may not be ready to heed fully the living Word's call to freedom—a call that compels us to turn away from accommodation and comfort to turn from all the worldly ways that lure and enwrap us. We, as a society have become complacent to almost every sin in the devil's master plan.

Yet God remains faithful! God declares God's word to this and every generation. To the crowd by the Lake of Gennesaret—to Simon and James and John—to generations before them—and now to us. From the creation to the

people wandering in the wilderness to Jesus to now. God's Word breathing us in as God calls us, nourishing us as we gather in God's Name, and breathing us out to the world, pushing us outward toward the future God has in store for us.

From that moment on that fateful Sunday morning in Alaska, about 21 years ago when I heard God's Word spoken directly to me until today I've tried my best to follow where Jesus has led me. It's not easy and many times I've allowed my own will to interfere with where God wanted me to go, but this journey has given me immense satisfaction and a powerful purpose for my life. Through all the ups and downs Jesus has always been there walking beside me and through His Holy Spirit leading and protecting me along the way. I know I'm still a work in progress and I'm so thankful God has given me all of you to walk with and discern God's will for me, for each one of you, and for all us together.

My friends, God is still in the business of freeing us from our nets and fishing boats and anything else that holds us back from following in Jesus' footsteps. God is still transforming us by his Word into His people for His mission in His world. May we hear the power of God's Word today. May we speak the power of God's Word in all we say and do. May God's word be heeded by us and by this generation to transform the world into God's Kingdom on earth. Amen.