

The Lost Dreams of the World's Worst Fishermen

January 24, 2021

Truth be told, none of the fisherman who followed Jesus had been any good at their job. They were the world's worst fishermen.

Simon, later to be called Peter, was the worst of them all. We get hints at this in Scripture. He falls into the Sea of Galilee trying to walk on the water like Jesus. You remember the story. It's usually interpreted as a test of faith. But, in fact, it's a test of stupidity. Simon – called Peter, Petrus, the Rock – climbs out of the boat, dumb as a rock, and sinks like one, too. What decent, even sane, fisherman tries to walk on the water?

And the other three – Simon's brother, Andrew, and the sons of Zebedee, James and John – weren't much better. James and John weren't mending their nets because they had caught too many fish. They were mending them because they had snagged them on the shoals. You remember the story. Jesus comes along and these guys are fishing and they're catching NOTHING. N-O-T-H-I-N-G.

And Jesus says: "Uh, dudes, try it on the other side of the boat. You see all those fish jumping over there? Doesn't take a genius to figure out that you've got your nets on the wrong side of the boat. Crucify me if I'm wrong, but I think you'll have better luck on that other side."

And they did. They were the world's worst fishermen.

So, we might think that Jesus wasn't really taking them away from much when he offered them the opportunity to fish for people. Fishing's a rough, dangerous way to make a living. Early mornings – every morning. Stink – you don't get that stink out of you. It's not a perfume likely to attract anyone other than flies. And then seasickness. Storms – you remember that story, too, right? Jesus is asleep in the cabin and the mighty fishermen are up on deck and they are all freaking out. "Look at those big waves!" "I'm soaking wet and cold." "We're gonna die out here!" World's worst.

But, in fact, Simon and Andrew and James and John had their dreams. And those dreams got lost when they followed Jesus. It was like they had to quarantine their dreams. But, in fact, by following Jesus, these Galilean fishermen lost some dreams but gained others that they could not possibly have imagined on that day on the lakeshore. Fishing for people meant their entire lives changed. They lost their own dreams, vivid dreams, nonetheless, to follow Jesus. And while they grieved for that loss, for sure, they also had opened before them something amazing, extraordinary, even infinite that they only glimpsed, in part. We can learn from them, as we learn to deal with our own lost dreams in this time of pandemic.

Simon's dreams weren't complicated. He was only fishing to pay the bills because he really wanted to be a gladiator. He was known throughout the region as the Galilean Bay Crusher. In fact, just a week before Jesus showed up he had been in the feature battle in the Capernaum Amphitheater against The Caesarean Ram...and won! His next fight, planned for a week hence, was against the Tel Aviv Buccaneer – although nobody in the ancient Mediterranean was quite clear what a Buccaneer was, but in any event Simon Peter dreamed of fame and fortune as a wrestler. That was not an easy dream to give up.

Andrew, Simon's older brother, had a wife, Leah, and two children: Samuel and Sarah. Andrew's dream was that they might have a little cottage of their own by the sea, rather than the squalid hut in the middle of Capernaum that they were living in. That hut was right next door to the next squalid hut, and the next, and the next. They had no privacy. You could hear everything at night. He and Leah lay in their bed, with their kids on pallets just feet away from them, and they talked about a little cottage, with two rooms, off by itself. Maybe a garden behind it; some vines with grapes for wine and an olive tree or two. Some grandkids running around, someday. That was Andrew's dream, and although he did bring Leah, Samuel and Sarah with him to follow Jesus – remember how Jesus said, “let the little children come to me?” – Andrew left behind his dream for a cottage by the sea.

James was married, too, to Rebecca, and they had six children. I won't share all of their names, but it was a brood. James was the oldest, and he stood to inherit the boats from his dad Zebedee (as commercial fishermen they had three). But James' dream wasn't to grow the business. He planned to turn that over to the hired men to run while he became an assemblyman or even magistrate. Truth be told, James was really a zealot; his dream was revenge. He wanted to overthrow the Empire and establish a Jewish rule, for Jews – free of interference (and taxes) from Rome.

John, James' younger brother, didn't share his brother's zealotry. His dream was to be a scholar. He wanted to leave behind fishing as soon as possible, and maybe join the Essenes who had one of the most amazing libraries at their monastery in the desert. He was eager to be a scribe, copying the wisdom of the ancients for the future while also spending his time in prayer and fervent acts of devotion.

All these dreams were lost when they followed Jesus, or so it seemed. And there were times they despaired. At times, they thought, “I want to go back to how things were,” or “I wish things were normal, again.” Or they said: “I may have been terrible at fishing, but at least I knew where I was going to sleep at night.” Or, perhaps, “I really hate the Romans, but they do give us good roads, and education, and wine. Yes, the wine was good.” All those dreams of normalcy – little dreams but satisfying nonetheless – wiped out. Gone. Erased in a few months.

Except, in fact, their dreams expanded. Jesus showed them new dreams – of healing, of hope, of a future kin-dom of God that was already at hand. Through his encounter with Jesus, Simon Peter (in the words of Howard Thurman) knew that the disinherited, the poor, the oppressed, were:

“Living in a climate of deep insecurity. Jesus. . . had to find some other basis upon which to establish a sense of well-being. . . Deep from within that order he projected a dream, the logic of which would give to all the needful security. There would be room for all, and no one would be a threat to another. ‘The kingdom of God is within.’ . . . The basic principles of his way of life cut straight through to the despair of his fellows. . . By inference he says, ‘You must abandon your fear of each other and fear only God. You must not indulge in any deception or dishonesty, even to save your lives. . . Hatred is destructive to hated and hater alike. Love your enemy, that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven.’”

Peter never wrestled again – although you'll remember he did go after the Roman Centurion when Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. In fact, according to tradition, Simon

Peter – the Rock – died a horrible death in the Coliseum in Rome, hanged upside down by the Emperor Nero because Peter did not want to be crucified in the same fashion as his Lord. And yet, after denying Jesus before, by now his dreams had grown, not to conquer, but to seek justice, to seek the beloved kin-dom, through love, and we are still speaking of him today. For following Jesus, Peter entered an immortality that will never end.

Had he kept fishing? Had he beat the Tel Aviv Buccaneer in wrestling? Like grains of sand on the shore...

Andrew, as recorded by Leah (in the words of Langston Hughes), gave up his dream of a little cottage, and died according to tradition in 60 (about 30 years after meeting Jesus), hanged in an X shape by the Roman governor Aegeas in the city of Petras, Greece. But his dream had expanded, too, as he might have put it, again, quoting Langston Hughes:

I dream a world where one
No other one will scorn,
Where love will bless the earth
And peace its paths adorn
I dream a world where all
Will know sweet freedom's way,
Where greed no longer saps the soul
Nor avarice blights our day.
A world I dream where black or white,
Whatever race you be,
Will share the bounties of the earth
And every man is free,
Where wretchedness will hang its head
And joy, like a pearl,
Attends the needs of all mankind
Of such I dream, my world!

The Apostle James, via his wife, Rebecca (in the words of Amanda Gorman), left behind his zealotry and dream of revenge although Jesus did still call him Boanerges, Son of Thunder, and came instead to dream of peace, and died for it, beheaded in Jerusalem in AD 44, at the order of King Herod Agrippa of Judea who was the first to persecute Christians (the story is told in Acts 11). And yet James left behind the dream inspired by his following Jesus, in the words of Ms. Gorman:

We lift our gaze, not to what stands between us, but what stands before us.
We close the divide because we know to put our future first,
we must first put our differences aside.
We lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another.
We seek harm to none and harmony for all.
Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true.
That even as we grieved, we grew.
That even as we hurt, we hoped.
That even as we tired, we tried.
That we'll forever be tied together, victorious.
Not because we will never again know defeat, but because we will never again sow division.

Scripture tells us to envision that everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree,
and no one shall make them afraid.

If we're to live up to our own time, then victory won't lie in the blade,
but in all the bridges we've made.

That is the promise to glade, the hill we climb, if only we dare.

The disciple John, called by Jesus "beloved," came closest to living his dream. According to tradition, he never became a scholar (although there is a Gospel in his name that is, far and away, the most scholarly of the four canonical Gospels). But John is said to have lived to a ripe old age, dying around the year 98 (so 68 years after meeting Jesus) in Ephesus, in what is now Turkey.

He never walked the streets of Rome as a Stoic Philosopher, but he had become part of a beloved Community, as the beloved disciple, and (again according to tradition) he had taken Jesus' mother, Mary, with him to Asia Minor, where she lived near him.

But his dream had grown, too, with depth he could not possibly have imagined, in the words of my dear friend from Clintonville, Jim Schultz, offering his version of Langston Hughes' "I Dream a World":

I dream a world where sex and race
Are not just boxes checked.
Where science and religion
Are both worthy of respect.

I dream a world where humanity
Measured not by getting, but by giving.
Where a person is just one of earth,
Gaia includes all things living.

I dream a world where citizens and
Immigrants from every nation
Are free to pursue health and happiness
No matter their vocation.

I dream a world where
Kindness is the only way,
Acceptance of our differences,
Respect for words we say.

A world I dream has gratefulness
Expressed for each and every minute.
Joy and praise for what we have,
Not consumption without limit.

If one of us can write it,
And one more of us can see,
The future that we dream of
will become reality.

I don't know where all of you are these days, psychologically, spiritually, socially. I hope this week was better than last. But I do know this: When we think we're the world's worst fisherman, that's when God is about to change our dreams. When we think we're the world's worst fisherman – and believe me, I've been there – that's when Jesus is inviting us to follow.

When we think that the only dream we're going to be allowed is to be a wrestler, or own a cottage, or be a magistrate, or even be a scholar: God is going to give us another dream, through Jesus, where we find heights beyond our imagining, depths so low that they taste like the sea, and the love of God and our neighbors that takes us out of ourselves, beyond ourselves, into loving service to God and our neighbors, on behalf of justice and peace. We may not get there in our lifetime – to the mountaintop where all good dreams are realized – but God knows: I have a dream. And God has a dream for us, too. Amen.

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Mark 1:14-20
January 24, 2021