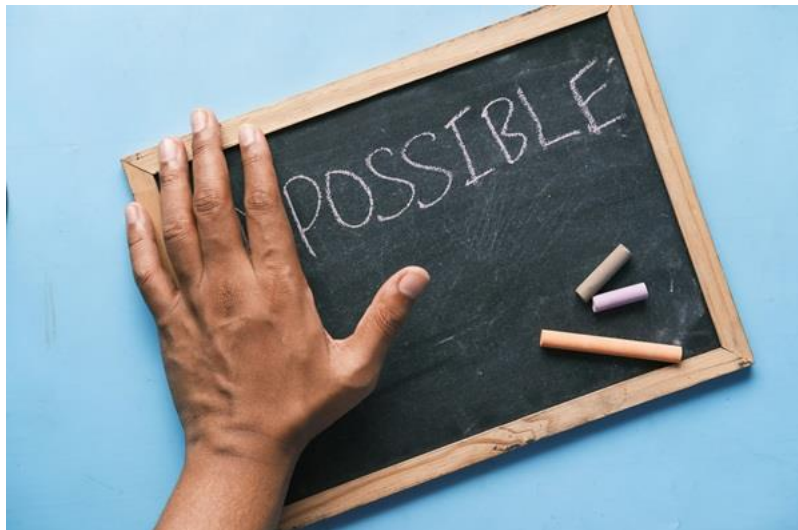




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The Wildness of God: The Way of the Holy Springtime VI

Jesus challenges our deeply held convictions



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The longer we linger in this telling story about the way in which Jesus breaks into our lives, with all the wildness of God, the more we discover about this way we have chosen, after »The Way« chose us.

As the story moves towards its climax, Jesus intervenes one final time, and it is in some ways the most difficult intervention, because it touches on something we do not easily change or relinquish: our deeply held convictions. It is found in the line: »And when he had ceased speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.'«

Here Jesus intervenes in an area of Peter's deepest competency. The son of a carpenter is telling a fisherman how and when to do his job. I have yet to meet a human being who enjoys this moment. After all, Peter holds deeply held convictions about fishing, when it is suitable, where it is most likely to be profitable and where not. They are not superficial convictions either, but born of years of experience as well as countless hours of practicing his craft. Moreover, these convictions have borne out their pragmatic usefulness and viability over and over again. This is not the first time he has cast a net, and it is not the first time he has brought home fish.

This is a hard moment for all of us. Jesus is not questioning the competency or training of Peter, but he is challenging his deeply held conviction, that, at least in this case, he knows the boundaries of the possible, and that he knows them better than Jesus. We all have

such deeply held convictions. There are areas of life and experience where we are certain that we know what is possible and what is not. We are convinced that we know the boundaries of the possible, that we know the pragmatic boundaries between fullness and emptiness, and therefore know when it is a waste of time to cast the nets. I emphasise here, that this is not a matter of willfulness, but of conviction. Long and tried ways of approaching life forge these convictions in us. We know what works and what does not. We know what is doable and what is useless. Therefore, we determine **where** and **when** we will act, will cast the nets. Old stories of emptiness mark us deeply, so we are unlikely to wager much in those moments. We are deeply convinced that they are a waste of time.

The challenge of Jesus is to be open to a fullness determined and given by God. We are to seek out the surprising place and the surprising moment in which we can be lavished with a fullness beyond our previous experience. It is the challenge of the Lord to wager something in order to discover that there is a fullness in the world which is greater than our old stories of emptiness. It is the hallmark of the wildness of God. It still seeks fullness for us in places where we are convinced: there is nothing to be gained here.

The danger at this point of the story is to romanticise Peter's response. »And Simon answered, 'Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.'« It is tempting to interpret this as a sign of faith and trust in Jesus. The story itself, however, denies that interpretation. This is sarcasm. A fisherman, who has been at this trade for years, tells Jesus that they have been at it all night, but if he thinks he is so smart, then they will let the nets down. This is definitely sarcasm and not faith. After all, if Peter believed even for one moment that there was even the slightest possibility that this could be a successful venture, how do we explain his response? For once the nets are brimming fish, Luke tells us: »But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.' For he was astonished, and all that were with him, at the catch of fish which they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon.« Peter is shocked, astonished, startled. His sarcastic disbelief makes him fall to his knees in regret and remorse, because he was genuinely convinced that this fullness was impossible.

Who among us does not know such a moment of surprise and shock? The wildness of God does that to us. It opens up a path through the Red Sea when we are convinced that there is no way forward. How many of us have come to that moment of desperation where we said to ourselves: I cannot go on! We are not lying in that moment. We are not deceiving ourselves. Surveying the situation to the best of our knowledge and ability, we see no horizon of hope, no path yet to be trodden, no possibility yet to be tied. Yet, we are still here, and obviously were able to go on. Our lives are dotted with moments in which the fullness we received was beyond our expectations.

This is a surprising and yet profoundly authentic moment of the story. We would imagine that the unexpected and almost unmanageable fullness of the nets would be a moment of explosive and effusive rejoicing. But when we are overwhelmed by a fullness we did not expect and did not believe in, a fullness of life and possibility that contradicts our deeply held convictions about where and when it is to be found, we are more likely to be stunned than ecstatic. Because that fullness now challenges us. It challenges us to revisit old assumptions and to be open in the future to the possibilities of God, rather than to sarcastically dismiss them.

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