

# St James United Church

Message for April 23, 2023  
Third Sunday of Easter / Earth Day



“Fishing from the Right Side”  
- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Jn. 21:1-14; 1 Pt. 1:17-23; “Earth Day on the Bay” by Gary Soto

We began our Easter journey in the garden and though today we’re on the beach as disciples go fishing, in a very real sense we’re still there. The garden isn’t a place, mythical or otherwise, but a value system, a desire for connection, and the Risen One is there on the beach, as surely as last week in the upper room, as surely as he stood in the garden by the empty tomb the week before, inviting us into God’s kin-dom. We normally think how his invitation reshapes how we relate to God, as I shared Easter Sunday, or shifts how we relate to one another, as I shared last week. But it includes how we relate to all other creatures on this planet.

This is important not just because yesterday was Earth Day, but because of the context of the gospel as Peter and six other disciples go fishing. On the face of it, the situation is ordinary, the seven of them putting in a hard night’s graft, making them not so different from any of us. It’s odd on another level though, because we know Peter went on to become a great apostle. Why then was he and the others not spreading the news of how Jesus had called them to a different life? Why back where he started? Because Jesus had died, at the hands of the authorities, their hopes in his overturning Roman rule dashed. They felt they had no choice but to return to the work they’d known, oppressive as it was, extracting all they could from the sea, most of what they caught not benefitting them but lining the pockets of the merchants who bought the fish and the government which taxed it so heavily their labour felt futile. Sound familiar?

They felt trapped in a situation they knew was fruitless, but the politics and economics of their situation left them with little choice, like the climax of Gary Soto’s poem, as he finds trashed running shoes on the shore then looks up and sees a cargo ship bringing more of the same. I know that I often feel like that, caught despite my best efforts to make changes to lessen my ecological impact. My actions feel futile because the system seems immune to real change. It’s why we have an annual Earth Day, to remind us that not only can we make a difference in spite of how caught in the status quo we are, but we really need to push for broader change.

Thankfully, into this scene steps Jesus, the Risen One, inviting his disciples to cast the net on the right side of the boat, doing so in early morning as it had been for Mary by the empty tomb. And this time their labour isn’t futile as they catch an abundance of fish. So what’s going on? Well it isn’t to valorize extractive labour, quite the opposite. The key is how they cast the net on the right, the side in Jewish thought connected to creativity, blessing, ritual. They are fishing with a view to God’s way of seeing their catch not the Empire’s, something we are called to do.

This way of seeing is summarized in Peter's letter as he writes that God has no favourites but treats every people the same. Our creation myth in Genesis presents a familiarity between Adam and Eve, our primordial parents, and the plants and animals. It is an ideal picture perhaps but also an invitation to see them differently, to see "peoples" in 1 Peter not only as human nations but as other than human nations too. We've lost this connection in the Western world, but it's affirmed in Indigenous perspectives, like the Haudenosaunee thanksgiving address as they acknowledge the plants and animals, rivers and sky, all the elements, each led by a species, like the strawberry for the berry nation or maple for that of the trees. It's a reverential way of looking at the world. We may scoff at it as naïve but in our business focused world, corporations have rights as persons under the law. Why not reclaim an older view which recognizes rivers as persons, whole ecosystems as having a right to be protected? This aligns with Jesus' way of thinking. He looked to flowers and birds as a source of teaching, a gift to be cherished rather than a trove to be plundered.

He could do this because he sacrificed himself long before he died on the cross, letting go of a need to be set apart and above others. He instead recognized the connections he had with the natural world as much as with other humans. He communed with God in nature not just to get needed quiet but because he understood that God is found there and not in a distant heaven. This must have been liberating for him, a setting free from the empty lifestyle of exploitation all around him. He invites us to do the same, seek blessing as we sit in awe at the world's beauty, experience God in the majesty of an iceberg, the joy of a junco's song, the miracle of crocus pushing its way through frozen soil. This is casting our net on God's side and finding blessing.

The more we do this, the more we see God's presence wherever we look. I know I do. And so I want to protect it, leaving me frustrated that we seem stuck in the status quo. Perhaps we need to hear Jesus' invitation as a call to shift not just how we see nature but speak about it too. I watched a show about this, how the panicked messages about climate change, though true, have made us disengage from protecting the planet rather than do more. So when we talk to family and friends, we need to empower them by telling success stories. This is really important with younger people who are hearing so much doom they experience high rates of anxiety and depression. Along with telling positive stories, we can reframe how we talk about making changes, inviting people to do things rather than to give them up. When we're just told what we shouldn't do, we feel guilty but don't make changes. So suggest to friends to eat more plants rather than to eat less meat, to drive with more people in your car rather than not to drive. When we do these things, we won't just find a blessing, but we'll be a blessing too, like Gary Soto not just noticing the cargo ship but cleaning the shore.

Today we gather with Jesus on the beach. He calls us to cast our nets on the right side, the side of blessing, of connection with God and each other. May we hear his call as one not just for us, for other humans, but for every creature, an invitation for all of life to be renewed and live as much as we can accordingly, shaped by God's kin-dom, a garden where everyone, everything, and every place can thrive. May it be so. Amen.