

Being a pastor is often an exercise in expecting the unexpected. I learned that rather quickly when I entered the ministry. People never act exactly as you would expect.

For example, young, rookie pastors are notorious for coming into their congregations expecting their members to be just as enthusiastic for studying God's Word as they are. And we must fairly quickly learn that our members are often not quite so fascinated by scripture as we are. We've literally made it our job to study God's Word. And so we assume that everyone else has as well.

But you all have your own jobs and your own talents and lots of things competing for your time and attention. And Bible study simply can't consume your life like it consumes ours. And so there's a process of lowering our expectations.

At the same time, there have been plenty of times I realized that I had lowered my expectations too far. When I've watched God's people come together in amazing displays of faithfulness and love for His Word and love for their neighbors. Displays that filled me with hope and joy and made me realize that truly nothing is impossible with God.

Being a pastor is an exercise in expecting the unexpected. Probably because being Jesus' disciple is an exercise in expecting the unexpected. And that's exactly what we see in our Gospel lesson today.

As we've been discussing for the past few weeks, Jesus is just at the beginning of his ministry at this point. He began in his hometown of Nazareth. They weren't expecting a savior to come waltzing into their city. And they certainly weren't expecting one of their hometown boys to be that Messiah.

Things like that didn't happen in their town. The apostle John writes that upon hearing that Jesus was from Nazareth, one of his own disciples exclaimed, "Nazareth?! Can anything good come from there?" Nazareth was not the type of place you expect anybody important to be born.

So Jesus moved on from Nazareth and went about 20 miles north to Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee. And there he began preaching to a crowd of people who weren't expecting much of anything, but liked what they heard. In fact, they liked it so much that Jesus had to get out on a boat and preach from the water just so that everybody could hear him.

There was someone in that crowd who especially liked what he heard. He had heard Jesus before. In fact, his own mother-in-law had recently been healed by Jesus. That man was the owner of the boat Jesus was on. And his name was Simon.

And yet, for all that Jesus had already said and done, Simon still had his doubts. To me, Simon seems like a practical man. A blue-collar fisherman just trying to finish-up a hard, disappointing night of work. And so, despite knowing that there was something extraordinary about Jesus, Simon kept his expectations pretty low.

*"Put out into the deep and let down the nets for a catch."* The words probably brought either a bemused smile or an exasperated frown to Simon's face. For Jesus had just told him to do something that went contrary to every rule of fishing on the Sea of Galilee: You don't fish during the day. You don't fish in deep water. And you don't fish at a spot that's already proven to have no fish.

But Simon went ahead with it. Maybe the Spirit was already working through Jesus' words. Maybe he was just curious about what would happen. He definitely knew what he expected to happen, though.

The result, as we all know, was decidedly unexpected. The catch was more than Simon's boat could handle. Almost more than two boats could handle.

And Simon was in awe. He fell to his knees and looked up at Jesus like Isaiah in our Old Testament lesson had looked at the very throne of God. He saw in Jesus the wisdom of a prophet and the power of the almighty God. Power enough to destroy a pathetic sinner like himself.

And it is here, at his point of greatest humility and weakness and contrition, that Luke first refers to Simon as Peter. Petros. Greek for “the Rock.” This groveling little man was to be a rock in the foundation of Christ's church?

Well, not exactly. This little man was absolutely right. As Peter himself admits, he was a sinful man in the presence of The Almighty and he deserved destruction. But the Spirit that was already living inside Peter had the power to do wonders. It had the power to catch more than fish. It had the power to grab the hearts of men, just as it had grabbed hold of Peter's own heart. Just as it has grabbed hold of our hearts.

Like the people of Galilee, we have heard God's Word. And it has worked in us in ways we can't possibly fathom. I've seen it at work in those amazing moments of faith and love in our congregation. Moments that blew away all my expectations. But how many of us live our lives expecting the unexpected?

In researching for this sermon, I came across a commentary on Luke by a rather liberal theologian. He pointed out that the catch of fish wasn't necessarily a miracle. Perhaps Jesus just looked at the water a little harder, saw a school of fish near the surface, and knew where to direct Simon to cast his nets. Perhaps this wasn't a miracle at all.

The absurdity of this astounds me. Despite all of Luke's efforts to spell out the miraculous nature of this event. Despite the plain logic that a professional fisherman would have more skill at fishing than a carpenter. Despite all of that, this educated theologian still refused to accept the unexpected.

But this isn't a flaw limited to trained scholars. It extends down into the church as well. How many people in our churches have accepted that God's Word is true, and yet can't decide if a day in Genesis actually means “a day?” How many have heard Jesus himself say that in marriage a man is to be united to his wife, and yet struggle to define marriage? How many have decided that killing an infant one day after it's born is definitely murder, but can't figure out if killing it one day before it's born is wrong?

And these are just the public controversies. How many private doubts go unexpressed? The woman with breast cancer who can't understand why God would allow such horrible diseases in this world. The father working day and night to provide for his family who decides that God just doesn't really matter when it comes to putting food on the table. The children, like myself, who grow up without a father, or in an abusive household, or in any number of other horrible situations, and struggle to understand what it means to pray to “God the Father.”

Yes, I know what its like to doubt. To look around you and see pain and chaos, and decide that these are the things to expect. That this is all the world is. And guess what? When sin and death are the expectation, God is just a silly carpenter telling you to fish in all the wrong ways.

But that is why I'm up here today. That is why we all need to hear this message. Because we need to know that there is more than sin in this world. There is more than pain. There is more than death.

There is Jesus Christ. There is God come down to earth to create far more than fish. He has come to create the faith that overcomes doubt. The faith to show us that God is here. And he has revealed the fullness of His power and glory and love in His own Son.

I know that I have a heavenly Father because I know His Son. And this book we call the Bible is not some abstract collections of stories. It is Jesus Christ's letter to us. And he says to us, “This is who I am. I was born, died, and rose again for you. I am real. My Father is real. And the Spirit living inside you is real.”

And when the Spirit of God is working, there is no room for doubt. Jesus responds to Peter with the words, “*From now on, you WILL be catching men.*” Period. End of story. It will happen.

There is no doubt in those words. He's not telling them to do this on their own. He's not saying, “Go try to catch men. Do your best. I'll wait here.” There would be no point. Peter's results would have been as poor as the previous night of fishing.

But with Jesus Christ directing the catch, that's when miracles happen. That's when all our expectations are blown away. That's when the unexpected happens.

Follow Jesus, and you will catch men. Pull your boats onto the shore and leave everything behind. And expect something more than sin and death.

Expect that the same Savior who called you as his disciple will lead you in the ways of discipleship. He will lead you into a great catch that overwhelms your expectations. And rest in the comfort and knowledge that his Spirit is forever with you and you will never be alone. Expect the unexpected and be a fisher of all mankind. Amen.