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1-1-2001

# A Fish Story

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## Recommended Citation

Paul, John Steven, "A Fish Story" (2008). Soul Purpose Liturgical Drama. Paper 7. [http://scholar.valpo.edu/soul\\_purpose/7](http://scholar.valpo.edu/soul_purpose/7)

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A Fish Story  
A Liturgical Drama based on Luke 5:1-11  
A play for actors and singers by John Steven Paul  
Developed in workshop by Soul Purpose  
The liturgical drama troupe of the Valparaiso University Theatre  
First Performance: Sunday, February 4, 2001

Cast

Mrs. Zebedee  
An old Fisherman  
James  
John  
Simon  
Jesus  
fishers

LUKE 5: 1-11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.' Simon answered, 'Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.' When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!' For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.' When they had brought their boats to shore; they left everything and followed him.

*Voices from off stage.*

Voice 1.

Sunfish.

Voice 2.

Flounder.

Voice 3.

Pumpkinseed.

Voice 4.

Cichlid.

Voice 1.

Grouper

Voice 2.

Sauger.

Voice 3.

Bluegill.

Voice 4.

Trout.

*An OLD FISHERMAN enters and with a good deal of stress and strain sticks up “Zebedee.”*

Voice 1.

Crappie. [*Pronounces the short a sound.*]

MRS. ZEB.

A what?

Voice 1.

A Crappy.

MRS. ZEB.

That's Crappie. [*She pronounces the word with the ah sound.*]

Voice 1.

Oh. Crappie.

*After the sign is in place, MRS. ZEBEDEE comes out.*

MRS. ZEB.

Good morning. I'm Zebedee, as in "The sons of Zebedee." Ha! That'll teach you to jump to conclusions. Well, why not? The sons of Zebedee are my sons, too! It takes two, you know. Besides, the old man's dead now. Slipped on a Soapfish and hit his head on the dock. Never came to. (*sigh*)

I miss old Zeb. He was a hard worker. A good provider. And he did give me two strapping boys. Well one of them's strapping anyway. They're all gone now: Zebedee, James, and John. Yup, I'm the boss now. And we still make a pretty good living, those of us that's left. (*slaps the OLD FISHERMAN*)

Not that I like it much. Disgusting, slimy beggars, fish. Flopping around in the boat, on the dock, on the shore. And the smell.... A stink like nothing you ever (*she quite self-consciously puns*) smelt. (*OLD FISHERMAN laughs at the pun as he exits.*) Just try to get it off. Old Zebedee did his best, but no matter how much he washed he could never get clean of it. Take it from a fishwife, you can always smell your fisherman coming. (*She sniffs the air*)

Yup, here comes one now.

FISHERMAN.

What's this one, Boss?

MRS. ZEB.

That's a Grouper.

ANOTHER.

This?

MRS. ZEB.

A Flounder.

ANOTHER.

An' this 'un?

MRS. ZEB.

Carp.

What I like is the naming. You see, each of these fellas has got a name. And each one fits into a specific family of fish. I like to look at 'em -- one at a time, if I could -- put a name on him and put him into a category. Then I got 'im where I want 'im.

That's a Walleye. (*another*). A Bluegill (*another*) A Sockeye. (*still another*) A Chub. I *love* fish names. They get to be like a song. And sometimes I sing it out as I get them ready for market.

Zebedee? He couldn't be bothered. He didn't care if it was called "Tuna" or "Trout," as long as he could *sell* it. Now, don't get me wrong, I miss old Zeb. He made me laugh. He always had a good story...especially about the big ones that got away. Fish stories, you know<sup>1</sup>?

*[Three other fishermen come up to her.]*

*(To the first.)* Sturgeon. *(The next)* Mullet. *(Next.)* Hake.

NOW... here's a story old Zeb couldn't a told ya, because he wasn't around for the event. And I wish he was, cause he wouldn't believe it if I told him. Even now I can hardly believe it. I've spent most of my whole life on or near the shore of Lake Gennesaret and I've seen just about everything when it comes to water and boats and fish and men, but I never seen anything like this. It was the MOST AMAZING thing I ever saw!

### ***The Story of the Miraculous Draught of Fishes***

*The OLD FISHERMAN, with the same ceremony of his earlier sign placement, pulls a pin releasing a flap that says "AND SONS" right under "Zebedee".*

*Enter SIMON dragging a huge net behind him.*

*Finally JAMES and JOHN make their entrance.*

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<sup>1</sup> *Narrative point: MRS. ZEBEDEE is telling this story after everyone has left. "They're all gone now." She introduces the story and then the characters. At the end then, one of her sons comes back.*

JOHN.

*(bringing a fish)* What's this one, Ma?

MRS. ZEB.

Well, that's a catfish. You can tell by the whiskers.

JAMES.

*(bringing a fish)* And this one?

MRS. ZEB.

Bass. See it's big mouth?

FISHERMAN.

This 'un?

MRS. ZEB.

Hmmm. Never seen that one before. Let's call him ... a "Rockfish."

FISHERMAN.

Got a mess a them.

SIMON.

Hey, old man, get over here and help me clean this net so we can go home and get some sleep.

MRS. ZEB.

*(to SIMON)* Mornin', partner. *(no response)* I say, Simon? Tough night on Lake Gee, huh?

SIMON.

Fished all night with nothing to show but the scum in these nets.

MRS. ZEB.

So, what are we going to sell today?

SIMON.

You're sounding more and more like your husband every day.

JAMES.

No fresh today, Ma, we'll sell the salted.

MRS. ZEB.

*(trying to make it up a bit by changing the subject.)* How's the wife's mother?

SIMON.

Better.

JOHN.

Mother, the most amazing thing... A man, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth. He spoke directly to Rebekah's fever...he rebuked it...and it left her.

JAMES.

*(with deep skepticism)* And she got up from bed and made lunch.

JOHN.

What kind of man is this?

MRS. ZEB.

Must be ... an exorcist!

JOHN.

No mother, a healer.

JAMES.

He's Joseph's son isn't he? He's a carpenter.

MRS. ZEB.

Sounds like one of those...magicians.

SIMON.

They say he spoke wisely at the synagogue.

MRS. ZEB.

So he's a smart-mouth!

JAMES.

Yeah, so smart the people at the synagogue tried to throw him off a cliff.

JOHN.

The crowds follow him everywhere. They seek him out, trap him in houses, push him into corners begging him to heal their sick and to talk to them about the kingdom of God.

MRS. ZEB.

The *what?* What did you say?

JOHN.

The kingdom of God.

JAMES.

Careful little brother, that kind of talk could be...bad for business.

SIMON.

*(loudly, irritated)* Could I get a little more help with these nets, then? *I'm* near dead. *(JAMES and JOHN go to SIMON to help him with the nets.)*

*Enter JESUS. He stands in the nave for a moment before speaking.*

JESUS.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to bring release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free.



to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor!

**PAUSE.**

MRS. ZEB.

...and who's this quoting the Scripture now?

FISHERMAN.

I can't see anyone.

JESUS.

*(to SIMON)* Simon, son of Jonah. Come with me for I have a journey to make.

SIMON.

Where? Why?

JESUS.

I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities.<sup>2</sup>

SIMON.

Uh, Rabbi, I am deeply grateful to you for releasing my wife's mother from the demon...

JAMES.

How did you do that, Jesus?

FISHERMAN.

Can you do it again? I got a devil of a pain right here—

SIMON.

Hush, old man. Sir, my wife and her mother and I are forever in your debt. And I would like to help you, and perhaps some day... but, for now, this is my home, this my boat. These are my nets. *(He looks at them with some embarrassment.)*

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<sup>2</sup> Lk 5:43

JESUS.

It is written in the book of the prophet Isaiah, “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’”

MRS. ZEB.

Scripture again.

SIMON.

How will you travel?

JESUS.

We’ll be walking.

SIMON.

On the *roads*?

JESUS.

A long road.

SIMON.

For a long time?

JESUS.

Only God knows. Perhaps a short time.

JAMES.

Simon, the nets? (*Exits*)

SIMON.

I am a man of the water, Master, not of the road. I am a fisherman.

JESUS.

Then, fisherman, come to the water. (*SIMON hesitates.*) Come!

SIMON.

*(He practically begs)* Master, we have been working on the water all night long... *(Exits.)*

JOHN.

*(With his mother.)* It's him. It's the man who drove the fever out of Simon's mother-in-law.

MRS. ZEB.

The magician.

JOHN.

The teacher.

MRS. ZEB.

The smarty.

**PAUSE.**

*JAMES re-enters.*

JAMES.

Mother, there's a huge crowd coming.

MRS. ZEB.

And us with no fresh fish to sell.

JAMES.

We'll sell the salted. Now hurry. John--

JESUS.

Push off.

JAMES.

*(stunned for a moment)* Buzz off!

JESUS.

*(Calls)* Simon.

SIMON.

*(returning)* Here I am.

JESUS.

I'm asking you to push the boat out into the water. Please. Before we are trampled by the crowds.

SIMON.

Yes, Rabbi.

JAMES.

Simon!

*[SIMON, JAMES, JOHN and the FISHERMAN form a small group at the base of the chancel steps. They are close together as if in a boat. They push off.]*

JESUS.

*(After a moment, shouts out to the crowd)* Blessed are the poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God. Have you caught any fish?

JAMES.

Are you mocking us?

JESUS.

No. I'm asking you. Did you catch any fish last night? I'm hungry.

SIMON.

*(reiterating)* Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing.

JESUS.

Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.

SIMON.

*(after an internal struggle)* If you say so--

JAMES.

Simon, he's a carpenter ... or something...worse. What does he know? But you're a fisherman. You can see that everything is upside down here. We fish at night, not in the daytime. For the past year, our best catches have come from the shallows not the depths. Be reasonable!

SIMON.

*(To the FISHERMAN)* Do it. Row out into the deep.

*And they do this. They move from a huddled group into a wide-spread formation; that is, out into the world. [In the COR they move up into the galleries.]*

*When everyone is in place, JESUS and SIMON say almost in unison:*

JESUS, SIMON.

Let down your nets.

### ***The Miracle***

*At least 4 people on each side of the nave begin to manipulate a gigantic net saying:*

“get hold of it,”	Turbot
“grab the corner,”	Bluegill
“I can't hold on,”	Grouper
“it's too slippery,”	Bass
“my thumb is caught,”	Walleye
“wait,”	Sturgeon
“now I've got it,”	Salmon
“good! Now hold on,”	Mackerel
“let it go.”	Snapper
“watch out	Codfish
“there it goes”	Flounder
“down and down	Pollack
“deeper and deeper”	Chub

*Etc., etc.*

JAMES.

On “three” cast the net...

JOHN.

One, two, three...

ALL.

Let --- it --- go!

*Then, suddenly, the net traps a countless number of fish, and the actors respond:*

JAMES:

Simon! Fish! Thousands of them!

JOHN.

More than that.

FISHERMAN.

I never seen so many.

SIMON.

Help! They’ll swamp the boat! Get us another boat.

JAMES.

The nets are tearing.

*And the improvisation continues until, on cue, there is quiet.*

*SIMON returns to the floor.*

JESUS.

Simon, son of Jonah...

SIMON.

Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man. Best to let me stay here and fish.

JESUS.

...follow me. Do not be afraid.

SIMON.

I will not be afraid; I will stay here and catch fish. It is what I do; it is who I am.

JESUS.

From now on you will be catching people.

*FISHERMAN, JAMES, and JOHN come down to the floor  
and as they do a litany of names begins...*

Sunfish...	
Grouper...	
Salmon...	...Gary
Bass...	...Sean
Trout...	...Dee-Dee
Snapper...	...Sally
Flounder...	...David
Pompano...	...Meghan
Perch...	...Tom
	...Sandy

*Now the fish names begin to be replaced by the names of  
people.... These names should be invented by the actors.*

Margaret  
Katie  
Paul  
Marcia  
Jennifer  
Sarah  
Tim  
John  
Mary

JESUS.

Simon!

*SIMON looks on as JESUS begins to exit. Then...*

SIMON.

Here I am; send me.

*SIMON follows JESUS out*

*Then JAMES, & JOHN follow JESUS; the OLD FISHERMAN goes up to MRS. ZEBEDEE and hides the "AND SONS" panel of the sign.*

MRS. ZEB.

So that was that. An amazing fella, that Jesus. Still don't know quite what to make of him. Doesn't fit my categories, you know? Takes quite a bit for Simon and James to walk off the job. You'd think he was the Messiah, or something.

And how about that for a fish story? As good as any of Zeb's. And in THIS fish story, not a one got away -- 'cept me...and him. (*indicating the OLD FISHERMAN*)

Did you like that story? (*looks up*) Did you like that story, Zeb? I knew you would. And here's the point: there's a lot of things that are amazing in life. But some things you shouldn't just stand there gawking at with your mouth hanging open. Some things you got to DO something about!

JAMES.

*(re-entering just then)* Hey, Ma. We're going to need a bigger boat.

MRS. ZEB.

Amen.

**End**



## Notes, Questions, Ideas

Jesus sees that SIMON is exhausted after a night of no fishing success.
Jesus tests SIMON by asking him to put out his nets into the deep water.
Will Jesus make SIMON one of his disciples?

1. According to the Porpoises, this text is about 1) personal sacrifice to join the ministry of Jesus and 2) the sudden, unexpected intervention of God in your life.
2. Q: Where is the word from SIMON that he's going fishing, following the, what, ascension?
3. Mrs. Zebedee will be the NARRATOR. Her opening monologue has several purposes: 1) to tell us a bit about fishing, a dirty business perhaps, a business in which men get dirty and nets get dirty 2) to explain to us that she was always the one on the family who could keep the names of the fishes straight. Perhaps she was a diarist, too. She loved the names of fishes and catalogued them, wrote them down. Now we begin to hear a litany or chorus or even a song on the names of fishes.
4. Idea: is there a way to make the fishers like the angels of Isaiah, so, as they "ascend" we make the connection to the Isaiah text
5. Mrs. Zebedee will also introduce the theme of Epiphany:
6. a conflict is developing between MRS. ZEBEDEE and SIMON, "the rock on the water" The conflict may be that MRS. ZEB has really come to hate fishing and everything connected to it (except possibly the names of the fishes?) and SIMON loves fishing in a kind of existential way: he IS a fisherman.
7. Question: whose story is this? SIMON? He is the corresponding person to Isaiah and to Paul.
8. The point: From amazement to commitment.
9. Now there is a grand theatrical gesture in which as many actors as are available. Have climbed the stairs and stand looking down into the name, "the deep water," and they contemplate throwing a huge "net" over the people. This gesture is mimed with great

care and accompanied by voices. As the “net” floats down onto the crowd below, the names of the fishes are replaced by the names of people, perhaps these are people who the actors know by name. If not, they can be any names. The point is that we have come from the beginning in which Mrs. Zebedee has called out the names of fishes to the end where Jesus has commissioned his disciples to call out the names of people: to fish for people.

- [http://www.nga.gov/feature/artnation/bassano/thestory\\_2.htm](http://www.nga.gov/feature/artnation/bassano/thestory_2.htm)