

Tom James
Fish Series #1
Mark 1.16-20
“We Were Fishermen”
July 1, 2007

I’m afraid that I am a rather poor representative of my own branch of the James family. My family of origin is all but defined by two constants toward which I have been inconstant. For starters, for nearly three generations, James’ who worked almost entirely in one industry, and indeed one company—a regional grocery store chain that once dominated the south. The men were meat cutters or managers or executives; and, because the glass ceiling hung particularly low in that company, women worked cash registers until they decided they would be better off not working at all, as most eventually did.

The company isn’t doing so well anymore, and so all that is quickly changing. But the other constant in the James family, the one that shows no signs of retreat, has been that after work, or often before work, or on the weekends, the men in particular would find a way to get to ocean, or to the intracoastal waterway, to go fishin.’ All vacations were designed around the goal of fishing, even if it involved mosquitoes, gnats, diesel and queasy stomachs. The patriarchs of the family seemed hardly to notice. For children, a big part of growing up was learning how not to get seasick or bored. For spouses entering the family, a big part of becoming a James meant mastering an arcane language, laced with brand names of rods and reels, nautical terms, and especially boat terminology: trim tabs and transoms, bilge pumps and bow cleats, tuna towers and second mortgages.

In fact, fishing was so deeply ingrained in my family that the only uncle I had that did not enter the grocery business became a commercial fisherman. After inventing a revolutionary new type of surfboard design and founding a hot new watersports company in south Florida, my late Uncle Ted heard the call of the deep, and so he moved one of his retail stores along with his family to what was then a remote fishing village on Cape Hatteras.

There had been fishermen trawling, and netting, and long-lining for swordfish out of Hattaras for generations. There was a total outback fishing culture there, complete with a brogue that could only be described as halfway between coastal Virginia and pirate. Uncle Ted grew a thick, seaworthy beard, and began to pick up a little of the accent, and began living the life of a full-time fisherman, working the Pamlico sound for smaller fish like trout, the fierce Hattaras inlet for drum, and the deep waters of the Gulf Stream, some hundred miles off the Cape Hattaras shore, for tuna and swordfish.

It was a robust kind of life, a lot different from the weekend sport-fishing he was raised doing, and it required what my dad admiringly once called a “cast-iron stomach.” When a livelihood is at stake, rough seas cannot be entered into the equation—sometimes Uncle Ted would stay offshore for days and nights at a time working his long-lines, often alone, and way out there he would be a sitting duck for all manner of storms. Every once in a while, he would have to get a window or some navigation or communication device replaced after a thirty-foot wave came crashing through the cockpit. But he withstood the thirty-foot waves, and all sorts of other hardships, inconveniences and disappointments. Patiently and relentlessly he worked the nets and the lines in

the heaving waters under surging canopies of salt spray and the blazing sun and its million winking reflections, because he was determined to fish. He loved the wild ocean and its always unpredictable yield, because he was a fisherman.

I cannot help rhapsodizing about my uncle, because I admired him, though from a distance of many land-loving miles. I could never be like Uncle Ted—I am a person of books and ideas, and don't do too well with cleaning knives and outriggers. I'm too squeamish, and too in love with stability.

It is possible that Jesus had an uncle like Uncle Ted, and maybe he admired him, too. His mother Mary seems to have had a sister Salome, who seems to have been married to a fisherman, Zebedee. Uncle Zebedee, it appears, had a little fishing business, employing his two sons, named James and John, as well as men named Peter and Andrew.

It's hardly surprising that Jesus may have had fishing relatives. Fish were a hugely important source of protein in the ancient near eastern diet, and so the fishing industry was pervasive and healthy. The interesting thing about this is that it does not seem to have gone hand-in-hand with a love of the sea or of water generally. In the ancient Hebrew mindset, water was the symbol of chaos. God made life possible by separating out a space safe from the danger of the ocean. Over and over again, water is seen as the obstacle, the threat, the void which must be passed through or over or around in order to survive. And yet, the people draw life from it, and we find people who are at the very heart of the gospel story who make their livelihood in the midst of winds and waves and the dangers they bring.

And in this tumultuous choppy mix of need and fear the Jewish fisherman's soul was forged. The fisherman was tough-minded, action-oriented, not easily dissuaded or put off, full of courage, perhaps a "son of thunder" if Jesus' nicknames for James and John are any indication, and the owner of a "cast-iron stomach."

It is interesting that Jesus began recruiting among his roughneck fisherman cousins. He could have chatted up some left-leaning rabbis for the job, and they would have had a whole lot more credibility going in. It is perhaps more interesting that these four fishermen that Jesus approached first also become part of his inner circle. Apparently, Jesus wasn't simply picking the lowest-hanging fruit when he recruited them—rather, there was something about them that made them particularly useful as leaders in the movement Jesus was creating. They were tough-minded, action-oriented, not easily dissuaded or put off. And that was a good thing, because people were going to try. They were courageous, "sons of thunder." They had cast iron stomachs. They were going to need them.

I hope we have a little fun looking at the fish stories of the Bible over the next few weeks, but I hope we also recognize that there are serious issues at stake as well. The call to discipleship is a call to proclaim and live the gospel. It is a call to be an apostle, attracting people to the nets of faith and service. It is call to face challenges, and shifting winds, and uncertain currents with patience and determination. It isn't a call answerable only by

bearded men—far from it, powerful women like Mary Magdalene also were within the inner circle of Jesus’ ministry—but it is a call that requires courage, and perhaps a “cast-iron stomach.” Are you ready to go fishin’? In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, amen.