

Breaking Open the Word

Epiphany 5c

9th February 2025



Vesica Piscis

A very fishy tale

A weekly reflection and
sermon, with study and
prayer guides following the
RCL Lectionary

Dennis Webster

Revised Common Lectionary

Isaiah 6.1-8 [9-13]

Psalm 138

1 Corinthians 15.1-11

Luke 5.1-11

Book of Common Prayer (1662) Collect

Introduction

Reflection

Discussion Questions

Five Days of Meditation and Prayer

O Lord, we beseech thee
to keep thy Church and household
continually in thy true religion;
that they who do lean only upon
the hope of thy heavenly grace
may evermore be defended
by thy mighty power;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

INTRODUCTION

In his inspiring but tongue-in-cheek sermon, Dennis invites the congregation on a thoughtful journey through mathematics, philosophy, and scripture, all centred around the intriguing number 153 and its connection to the Gospel. He creatively intertwines the mathematical ideas of Pythagoras and Archimedes with the biblical narratives of Jesus, mainly focusing on Simon Peter's call to discipleship after a miraculous fish catch.

Through the lens of mathematics and geometry, Dennis emphasises how the number 153 represents a more profound spiritual truth, illustrating the theme of being called to reach out to "living people" and becoming active participants in the Kingdom of God.

Dennis encourages listeners to reflect on their faith journeys, comparing their experiences to Simon's transition from a tired fisherman to a devoted follower of Christ. He stresses the importance of trusting in and obeying Jesus' teachings despite personal limitations and failures.

He urges the congregation to unite in their mission for justice and compassion.

Dennis concludes by reminding everyone of their potential to transform while playfully challenging traditional views on life's ultimate questions.

Note: the number 153 is not necessarily significant in the call of the disciples, except in passing in John 21

Prayer Prompts

- Please pray for the strength to apply the sermon's key lesson to your daily interactions and decisions this week.
- Consider demonstrating the love and compassion discussed in the sermon and ask for guidance.
- Seek God's help in overcoming any obstacles that prevent you from genuinely living out the message you received this Sunday.
- Think about someone in your life who might benefit from the sermon's truths and pray for the right opportunity to share them with them.

God of Creation, breathe into us, made of clay,
your gift of life so that we, made in your image
may become your eyes, ears, hands and voice.

It's time for some maths. Yes, maths. Despite my computer trying to tell me it is singular, not plural, I stick with the English understanding that if more than one action is required in an equation, then maths is perfectly correct. QED!

If we have time, kids, we'll also delve into philosophy and history. Today's class is brought to you by the number 153 and the letters S, U, H, T, C, and I. While we're at it, we might as well cover a bit of 'war-like' language, a gripping fishy tale, fish anatomy, overcoming our limitations as people, and becoming cherished and valued members of the kingdom of God.

So, dear children, the time is right for us to be with Pythagoras and delve into life's deep waters.

Pythagoras: fish story

Pythagoras: explained, using identical circles.

Nomad and Dymad intersecting.

Take the intersection and work out its area.

Anyone know? No matter how large the circles are, as long as

they are equal, the answer will always be $\sqrt{3}$. As we all know from our logarithm tables, this equals 1.732—an utterly irrational number. It presents an irrational beginning to a sermon aimed at capturing people! Now, when we express 1.732 as a ratio, the closest we can get is 252/153.

In nature, this shape circles, and intersections are mirrored in the form of a fish's bladder. Archimedes, who provides this ratio and predates Jesus, is said to have referred to 153 as the "measure of the fish" (Vesica Piscis). Additionally, 153 has some intriguing mathematical properties; it is the sum of the cubes of its digits (1 cubed + 5 cubed + 3 cubed = 1 + 125 + 27 = 153).

The fishing story appears in all four Gospels, offering a unique perspective. Matthew and Mark emphasise the disciples' powerful calling and their meaningful mission. Luke adds a special touch: rather than just "Fishing for People," it's about capturing and safeguarding living souls.

John focuses on Jesus the Saviour and Simon Peter's restoration. Acknowledging God's presence, Simon resembles Moses at the burning bush and

Isaiah in the Temple. We can also reference Rachel, Rebecca, Hannah, Elizabeth (with Zechariah), and Mary. Jesus, meaning "the one who saves," redeems us all. What relevance does this have with 153?

How many fish were in the net? 153.

Let's revisit Pythagoras. If we take $\sqrt{3}$, turn it sideways, and extend the radials to the diameter's centre, we create an ichthus. Today is brought to you by the letters S, U, H, T, C, and I. Ichthus means "FISH" in Greek.

Early Christians created anagrams, similar to Pythagorean graffiti, confident many would recognise the symbol for Jesus: Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς Θεοῦ Υἱός Σωτὴρ (Jesus Christ, Son of God and Saviour). Many view a fish as a Christian symbol, often seen on bumpers. To determine a fish's status, if it has a car attached to its tail, you're in good company!

So, who would've thought Pythagoras, Archimedes, and Jesus shared this in a non-Eureka moment? Or maybe it's a Eureka moment from Australia's perspective, standing up against injustice and calling for fair treatment.

Jesus, the master, comfortably sat on Simon's boat, sharing his teachings. It was customary for good rabbis to teach while seated. When he finished, Jesus kindly

asked Peter to push away from the shore and cast his nets into the deep water. Although Simon had worked hard all night, he felt inspired by Jesus' words and remembered how he had healed his mother-in-law, so he willingly obliged. When he struggled to pull in the net, he called upon James and John for help.

Simon introspects and realises Pythagoras' theorems apply to advanced fishing, especially in finding net-throwing spots. He kneels and exclaims, "LORD," pleading with Jesus to leave, reflecting Jesus' command to the demons: "Get away from me."

"No, Simon!" Luke reminds us that Simon is Peter, which is a spoiler but resolves loose ends. "Follow me, and catch live people." They left everything to follow him. Unlike the Pythagorean story, we don't learn the fate of the fish; hopefully, they weren't wasted. Some old recycled philosophy uses this story to argue against eating living creatures. Pythagoras instructed the fishers to return the 153 to the depths.

Some early theologians view the "net on the other side" as a sign that the Gospel will reach wide, inviting all enveloped in God's love to find salvation. This passage emphasises "living people," adding a unique touch. Acts 15:11 states, "We believe we are saved by the gift of the Lord Jesus just like them," reminding us that every living person is caught in this net together, united in hope.

However, as modern scholar Luke Timothy Johnson points out, "There is no more reason to think that Luke used a resurrection tradition than to think that John used a Pythagorean tradition. Each explanation is possible, but neither leads us anywhere in understanding Luke's distinctive version of the prophet's call of his first followers."

Johnson notes that Peter is portrayed as a person of faith. Readers might believe that Simon, having heard of Jesus' healing of his mother-in-law, would be receptive to this teacher's power. However, Jesus' command challenges Peter's tiring night of failure. Despite this, he trusts the prophet's word and decides to follow Jesus into the unknown, logically building on his prior fishing experience "into the deep" based on faith.

The disparity between human limitations and divine fulfilment is key to Luke's "Great Reversal," seen in the suffering and resurrected Messiah. An observant reader may note Peter's calling Jesus "Master" and "Lord" as hints of a profound resurrection theme (Johnson, Luke Timothy. Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Luke, p. 162).

I hope you view today's gospel whimsically and that the maths hasn't confused you too much. Jesus, the teacher, used everyday items to illustrate God's kingdom. As a carpenter, he likely knew Pythagoras and Archimedes. His only mitre was a simple triangle, based on the sides' squares. Did he send Simon, James, and John with a logbook, smartphone, or watch? No.

He truly transformed their lives and built a ministry that inspires us today. Like Peter, we're called to unite people from our

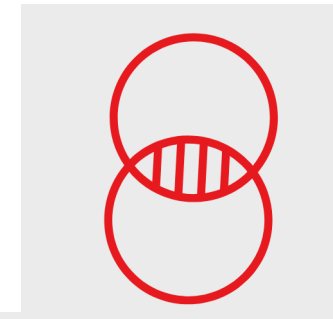
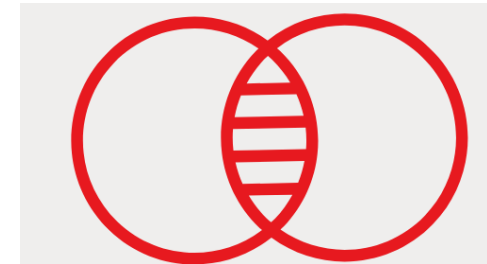
community, sharing messages of hope, redemption, and peace. Together, we can find the courage to stand up for justice and mercy, uphold our faith, and carry on our mission until the joyful return of the Lord Jesus.

Luke emphasises that the plight of the living and captives isn't just about memory or memorials; it's a global mission. We must welcome those seeking redemption and striving for God's word.

And if that means equipping myself with a fish symbol, a bit of maths knowledge, and a tongue-in-cheek perspective on how Luke was attempting to make sense of it all, then so be it.

Douglas Adams was mistaken when he suggested that the answer to life's ultimate question is forty-two. In reality, it's 1-5-3, with the power determined by the square root of the Sacred Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Unlike the Trinity, we are not perfect, but we are still encouraged to support others and show them what the Lord requires, always remembering that we, like Simon Peter, can have our lives turned around at any time.

There will be some homework to collect at the end of today's lesson.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What do you think is significant about the number 153 in the fishing story told by Jesus, and how does it connect to the idea of 'catching living souls'?
 - The sermon mentions that the number 153 appears in the fishing story across all four Gospels and is linked to capturing and safeguarding living souls. It emphasises that the Gospel invites all people to find salvation.
 - Have there been moments when you felt like you were 'catching' people or inviting them to something greater, be it a friendship or faith? How can you be more intentional about this?
- How does the relationship between Simon Peter and Jesus develop throughout the fishing story? What does this reveal about the nature of faith and following Jesus?
 - The sermon underscores how Simon Peter transitions from a struggling fisherman to a devoted disciple after recognising Jesus' power. It highlights that he shifts from calling Jesus 'Master' to 'Lord.'
 - Is there a time when you had to trust someone or something despite your doubts? How did that experience shape your understanding of faith?
- Why do you reckon the preacher mentions Pythagoras and Archimedes while discussing faith and fishing? What can we take away from linking these mathematical principles to spiritual truths?
 - The sermon draws parallels between mathematical concepts and the notion of deepening our understanding of God's kingdom, suggesting that, much like Pythagorean ratios, our faith can possess layers of meaning.
 - What are some structured or 'mathematical' ways to think about your faith? Can you relate everyday life to spiritual concepts?
- What does the 'Great Reversal' mentioned in Luke's Gospel signify, and how does it connect to overcoming limitations?
 - The sermon discusses how the 'Great Reversal' highlights the difference between humans' limitations and God's fulfilment, particularly in the context of Simon Peter's calling.
 - Can you identify the limitations that you feel are holding you back? How can you apply the idea of 'overcoming' those limitations in your life through faith or support from others?
- How do humour and analogies in the sermon engage the audience and convey more profound spiritual messages? How can humour contribute to discussions about faith?
 - The humour discusses complex ideas like math and fishing throughout the sermon, making challenging concepts more relatable and enjoyable.
 - Think about a time when you used humour to explain something important. How does humour help break down barriers in conversations about faith or serious topics?

Walking Gently on Sacred Ground



This five day devotional will be taking a deeper dive into the sermon from this weekend. It will explore the intersections of faith, mathematics, and the teachings of Jesus as illustrated in the calling of his first disciples. The number of 153 has no other significance other than linking the story to Pythagoras.

Day 1 Luke 5:4-6

The story of Jesus performing a miracle of fish-catching is not just about the act of fishing; it resonates deeply with the concept of faith and trust. As Simon Peter reluctantly obeyed Jesus' command to cast his nets into the deep waters, we see a metaphor for stepping beyond our doubts and into the realm of divine possibilities. This reflects how faith can lead us to unexpected and miraculous results, even when logic suggests otherwise.

In today's fast-paced world, it can be easy to overlook the small but significant nudges towards faith. Much like Simon, who found himself wrestling with the weight of nets filled to the brim, we too may struggle with o

ur own limitations versus the boundless potential of God's promises. This day's guide calls us to reflect on where we can cast our nets of faith wider and trust in God's unwavering support and guidance.

- What doubts are holding me back from fully obeying God's call?
- In what areas of my life do I need to practice more faith?
- How can I remind myself of God's faithfulness in challenging times?
- Ask for strength to trust God's directions even when they seem illogical.
- Pray for clarity on where to cast your nets of faith in your life.

Day 2 Matthew 4:19

Jesus called his disciples to become "fishers of men," a powerful statement that encourages us to look beyond our immediate surroundings. This metaphor extends to our mission as Christians to reach out to others and share the love of God. The imagery of fishing invites us to reflect on how we can actively engage in our communities and be instruments of hope and

salvation.

As we dive deeper into the meaning of this scripture, we are reminded that fishing is not only about catching fish but also about fostering relationships and nurturing the faith of those around us.

We are called to be active participants in God's kingdom, ensuring that we extend our nets to gather living souls.

This is a challenge that requires courage, dedication, and a deep reliance on God's wisdom.

- Who can I reach out to this week to share God's love?
- What does being a "fisher of men" look like in my daily life?
- How can I support others in their faith journey?
- Pray for opportunities to share the gospel with others.
- Seek God's guidance on how to nurture relationships within your community.

Day 3 John 21:11

The number 153 holds no significant meaning in Christianity, nor represents both the tangible and the spiritual. This number reminds us of the multitude of fish that were caught and signifies God's abundance in our lives.

Each fish represents a soul, illustrating that God cares for every individual and their journey towards Him. As we contemplate the miracles represented by this number, we can reflect on how God equips us not only with faith but also with opportunities to make a difference in the lives of those around us.

• Like the disciples, we are part of a greater mission—one that involves recognising and appreciating God's handiwork in collecting souls for His kingdom. Embracing this truth can catalyse us to engage more deeply in His work, knowing that every effort can lead to a significant impact.

- What does abundance in my life look like?
- How can I contribute to reaching others for Christ?
- In what areas of my life am I overlooking God's blessings?
- Thank God for the abundance He provides in both tangible and spiritual forms.
- Pray for a heart that is eager to share and spread His message.

Day 4 Acts 15:11

The early Christians faced numerous challenges as they sought to spread the gospel. By embracing the charge to reach the lost, they illuminated the truth of salvation through faith. This reflects the changing dynamics of their ministry—encouraging all believers to unite in Christ's love and redemption, irrespective

of their backgrounds or pasts.

In our journey of faith, we are often reminded of the importance of community and acceptance. The early church's example urges us to look beyond ourselves and actively welcome others into the fold, exhibiting grace and love that mirrors Christ's teachings.

Embracing diversity in church fellowship fosters a richer understanding of God's love and the unique ways He works through each believer.

- How can I be more welcoming to those who are different from me?
- What barriers have I subconsciously put up that could hinder others from joining our community?
- How do I show God's love to my neighbours and strangers alike?
- Pray for an open heart to receive others into your life and community.
- Ask God to help dismantle prejudices and foster genuine acceptance.

Day 5 1 Peter 2:9

As believers, we are a chosen people called out of darkness into light. This transformative journey beckons us not only to embrace our identity in Christ but also to live as ambassadors of that light to the world. Through our actions and words, we are encouraged to reflect the love and hope of Jesus, inviting others to partake in the same grace we have received.

The beauty of this final day's message is the recognition that we are not called to remain passive recipients of God's grace. Instead, we are commissioned to actively share the good news, employing our unique gifts to build and uplift our communities. Each of us plays a vital role in the grand narrative of God's kingdom—our lives are powerful testimonies of His faithfulness and mercy.

- How can I be a light in my community?
- What unique gifts has God given me that I can use for His glory?
- How can I share my testimony to highlight God's grace?
- Pray for boldness to share your faith with others.
- Ask God to reveal ways you can use your gifts in service to others.

End notes and further reading

Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Luke (St Paul's Press)
The Gospel of Matthew
The Gospel of John

Tannehill, Robert C, **Narrative Unity Luke Acts Vol: A Literary Interpretation: Volume One: The Gospel According to Luke:**, Augsburg Fortress Publishers 1991

The Worship Cloud: articles by N.T. Wright and Jane Williams

The Vine Newsletter SPCK

The Working Preacher: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-luke-51-11-8>

First United Methodist Church commentaary, Fort Riley: <https://www.jc1stunc.com/post/called-into-the-deep-a-reflection-on-luke-5-1-11>

Center for Excellence in Preaching, Calvin Institute, Missouri: <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2025-02-03/luke-51-11-4/>

Andrew's Version: <https://substack.com/@abmcg>

Bible Hub etc



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