

Morning Prayer Sermon Text from the 48th Annual Diocesan Convention of the Central Gulf Coast

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I come to you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer, Amen.

Good morning. It's great to be back in the place where it all began, St. James Fairhope. You see it was just about two years ago, I stood right here and delivered my Senior Sermon. I didn't know it at the time, but life was about to change. I was about to change. In the months preceding that moment, the life that I knew here in the Central Gulf Coast would be a distant memory in my rearview mirror. For those who don't know me, I'm Liam. But where I come from I go by a variety of different names such as Mr. Canterbury, or as some of my friends call me, "Brother Liam". You see, this year I have been called to something I never thought I would. I was called to begin the Episcopal Campus Ministry called Canterbury at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. Despite that it has made my busy life even busier as a run around from "Popcorn and Theology" to "Dinner and Compline", every day has been a learning and growing experience in itself.

Today, we hear of one of the earliest stories in Mark. The story where Jesus calls on his first four disciples. He tells them to drop their nets, follow him, and he will make them fishers of men. They didn't know Jesus. He wasn't part of their lives. He was a stranger and what most people find shocking, is they actually did it. They dropped their nets, said goodbye to their families, and followed Jesus. The Bible makes it seem easy. It almost seems unrealistic to us, doesn't it? They didn't argue or bicker, they just did as Jesus said. And while the Bible makes this look simple, why is it that we find it so hard? Why is it so hard to embrace change? Why is it so hard to take a new Christian responsibility? Why is it so fall back into the love of Jesus Christ? Well, the answer is quite easy... The answer is life itself.

We become too comfortable. Life gets in the way of Christ. We become too comfortable with the known and unknown. We associate change as a burden because why would we want to mix anything up when we're already content. We wonder why we should drop our net if our life is already great. You see it was no mistakes that Simon, Andrew, James, and John were holding nets. They represented so much more than simple devices to catch fish. They represent their past lives. They represent what was and could be. What I'm trying to say is, don't get caught in your own net. Don't sit around and reminisce on the days of old, or think of all the reason that you can't serve Christ, because I know there's all the more reason not to. Dream of life of what it should be if everyone decided to love their neighbor.

I know I make that sound all too easy, and because of that, I'm going to tell you a story. It's my story. Like I said, St. James, this pulpit, it represents a lot for me. It was where I learned to be a Christian, to walk in love together, how to be Episcopalian. It was the last place of stability for me, because when I stepped down from the pulpit, the Lord in the most loving way, took the floor out from under me as I plunged into the teenage wasteland that is college. It was quite ironic, because that Sunday, I was preaching on the Good Shepherd and the Abundant Life and how sometimes what you're looking for is already there. But I went searching again, sometimes in the wrong places. I'm a resident assistant at the university, so remember all those crazy stories from college you won't

tell your children. Well, I'm the guy that seen all those stories and has to clean them up. After seeing all of these things, I can say with the most sincerity that life together in college is tough. I can say that because my freshman year was tough. The people were tough. I had a hard time making friends, and I was trying to define who the new Liam Ayres. Huntsville was a foreign city to me, I had no friends or family there, I was lonely. I spent more times thinking about my old life, my old friends, my old identity back in high school. I wasn't ready to let go. I was tangled in my own net. When I did find a friend, it was very much "easy come, easy go". I never quite seemed to fit the bill on what they were looking for. So this repeated for about an entire semester, bouncing around from friend to friend like a pinball in a machine, and finally, I couldn't take it anymore.

Trouble ensued January of my Freshman year, which later I've come to call my burning bush. One night I found myself a group of friends, and they were nothing but bad news. The night still remains a blur, but what I do remember is how it ended. Someone triggering the fire alarms in the building, waking up the entire residence hall at 2 AM. What a way to meet your peers. To make matters worse, my so-called "friends" were the first to abandon ship leaving me to clean up the mess. After talking with the police, and getting a stern warning, I remember going to my car to cry. I was ashamed of myself and who'd I let myself become that night. I was afraid of what was to come knowing I had to go speak with the Dean, and I more than ever I felt abandoned and lost. So where do I go? I went to church.

I had been attending St. Thomas Huntsville since the beginning. It was one of the most consistent and stable things I could count at the time. I had also been acting as an assistant youth director of sorts for the EYC. After talking with some of the clergy that morning, I distinctly remember our rector, Paul Pradatt's, sermon. He was preaching about how if you ask, you will receive, but sometimes it comes in unexpected ways. Sometimes what we needed was there the whole time. That sermon brought me back to my original message, the Abundant life and where'd I left off. It was time to let go of what I knew. Afterwards, as I was leaving the church, our Deacon Jeannie pulled me aside and invited me to help out at a diocesan confirmation retreat at Camp McDowell. What I didn't know, is that life together was about to truly begin. You see, Jeannie had been trying to convince me since August to start Canterbury at UAH, but I always seemed to find a reason not to. I thought I wasn't ready, or it wasn't my calling. But I had an entire weekend to spend with Jeannie with nowhere to run, and through her work and encouragement, I would leave camp with a dream. To start a Campus Ministry at UAH.

You see, I didn't drop my net immediately when the Lord called for me. Like most people, I wasn't ready to begin a new life. I was caught up in my net of what already was. A previous chapter in my life that had already had its day in the sun, and now it was time to turn the page. What I found, when I finally did drop my net and follow Christ was beautiful. I found a new family and friends, and abundant life, a life together. You see, Jesus was all about living in relationships together. He taught us how to love our neighbor as ourselves. My problem was, most times I wanted to be a sheep, when I was supposed to be a shepherd. Like most people, we would rather be led instead of lead, and when we receive our calling we look back and say "are you sure"?

The day my life became whole again was the day I sat in the greenway at the university for a table marked for Canterbury. When I was approached and asked what do you believe in, I told them I believe in respecting the dignity of every human and to strive for peace and justice and that God loves everyone, no exceptions. This was the day that I started a new family, a life together with strangers, and shared the love and good news. Beforehand I was searching when I should've been

starting. It was this day I became a fisher of men, not a fisherman. And there is a difference. The fisherman will wait all day waiting to receive some Good News, while the fisher of men is already there. He's gone out into the world to share that Good News. We started small. The first four went by the names of Chris, Kate, Christina, and Olin. But the beauty is, once one person decides to walk in love and start a new life together in Christ, more are soon to follow. Because I believe that God is love, and if we're not in a community together to love each other, then what has this been about.

So next time you're standing on the edge, with your net still balled up in your hands, tangled with the life you once had, I urge you to cast it into the water. It's more useful that way. Be baptized and born into the family of Christ. And if you ever think your calling was a mistake, know there was no mistake. I know that because I've been there. All too often I wake up early on Sundays to wake everyone else up for church, and in my drowsiness, I ask, "Why me?" The answer is God loves me as he loves you, and he knew this was the next big step to grow in my life. I remember our vice director Chris came to me once and told me, "Can't you see that we are the least qualified people to lead a campus ministry. We're not priest, we don't have collars. We're just two dudes who were ill prepared for this calling."

I told him that he was wrong, that in fact, we were the most qualified people because our Father never called on those who were considered "qualified". Simon, Andrew, James, and John were nobody extraordinary before meeting Jesus. Like most people in the bible they were just people trying to go about their lives until they received their calling. I told him that what we were doing here was God's work and that we've gotten further than anyone else that had come before us, so that by itself is a miracle.

I call it falling back into the love of God. Imagine if I had never turned that next page and dropped my net. Everything I know today, the family, the friends, the love, the life together; it would all cease to exist. You can sit there and hold your net all day, but our Lord is over there, and he's walking. Simon, Andrew, James, and John were people just like you and me. They woke up that morning as fishermen and went to sleep fishers of men. I ask you, what will you be tomorrow?

Amen