

Sermon ✝ January 22, 2023
Matthew 4:12-23
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What an absolutely, unbelievably, remarkable, incredibly astonishing story. Okay, enough superlatives already. But, you have to admit, it is a real doozer.

Imagine for just a moment . . . that someone were to approach you . . . someone you barely knew . . . and ask you to drop everything and follow them. What would you do? You would probably tell them where to get off, right?

“Hey, that's not fair!”, you're saying, *“We're not just talking about someone. We're talking about Jesus here.”*

Sure, but Peter and Andrew, James and John didn't know then what we know now. To capture the full impact of this passage from Matthew it is perhaps, necessary to do some reading between the lines. Let's replay the story for a moment.

It is mid-morning on the shoreline along the Sea of Galilee. The sky is a vivid blue with just a few wispy clouds. The sun is warm. The day promises to be a hot one. But for now it is just right and the gentle breeze is sweet and fresh. Just off shore, in the knee-deep water, stand two burly fisherman pulling at their nets. As one of the men turns, he is surprised to see a man at the water's edge . . . looking at them intently, purposefully.

The fisherman nudges his brother who is still unaware of the visitors arrival. *“Simon, it's that fellow from . . .”*

But the big man named Simon, his eyes never leaving the man on the shore, gestures quickly to silence his brother.

The visitor now shifts his gaze. He looks to the boat lying at anchor. And then as he observes the beach he seems to grasp not only the occupation of the men, but the meaning of their lives as well.

From bits of netting, scattered remnants of yesterday's catch, knives, lines, and fish hooks . . . he seems to add up the sum of their existence.

And this is done without disapproval. In a strange way, they feel as though he has confirmed them in their labors. He knows what it is to work with his hands. And he, too, knows the satisfaction of a job well done.

It seems as if he has said this silently with a certain sadness in his voice. But in fact he has said nothing. He has merely been looking at the tools of their trade. The brothers sense their visitor has affirmed their honest toil, yet each feels, for the first time in his life, a sense of futility in their work as fishermen.

“Andrew, what have we to show for our lives?,” Simon might have asked. *“What have our lives amounted to?”*

The question had never occurred to them before. The brothers turn to look at each other, and each sees in the face of the other the very perplexity he is feeling. It is then that the man on the shore turns toward them and says quietly and soberly: *“Come with me and I will make you fishers of people.”*

And then there is a pause. It is one of those moments on which the fate of the two men hang . . . and because of that the fate of the whole world hangs there too. The moment leaps into eternity and back again. The moment passes and Matthew pulls us back again . . . *“and at once they left their nets and followed him.”*

Okay, this is all very interesting you say. *“When Jesus called his disciples it was a direct and compelling thing...but what does it have to do with me?”*

The question is a fair one. Theirs was a radical discipleship. They took a big step. We are not prone to live our lives in such dramatic ways.

So what does it mean for us to take the step of radical discipleship? Obviously, we are not Simon or Andrew. Our situation is different than theirs. But even if we cannot duplicate the experience of Simon and Andrew, we can respond to the call.

Think back for a moment about this lesson as it was just paraphrased. The simplistic side of me used to interpret the response of the brothers in a very simplistic way. *“Oh, you want us to leave everything right now and follow you? Sure, let's go.”* That kind of thinking doesn't give the two much credit.

But do see what was really happening? Jesus gave them an opportunity to assess their lives . . . to consider all they had done . . . to reflect on the meaning of their existence. And then after that . . . he asks them to come with him . . . and in light of the reflecting they realize they have no other choice.

So what is this radical discipleship? First, it is not an effort to try to somehow duplicate the experience of those early disciples. It is a conscious decision to follow in the foot steps of Jesus.

And as we follow, we shouldn't worry about failure, for failure there will be. It is the realization that we do not have to go it alone.

What it boils down to for us is this—it is a scene very much like Matthew's gospel. Can you picture it again?

The sky is a vivid blue with just a few wispy clouds. Only this time you are in the picture. And suddenly, you look up from your work—the dishes you are washing in the sink—the report on your computer—from whatever it is that is yours to do.

You look up and there he stands gazing at you. With a rapid glance at your surroundings, he takes it all in. And you feel he knows you, even better than you know yourself . . . your needs, your hopes, your little successes, your failures. At last he speaks. His words are both a gracious and warm command: "*Follow me.*"

There is a pause . . . a silent moment. It is one of those moments on which the fate of a person hangs and because of that the fate of the whole world hangs there, too.

The moment leaps into eternity. And you must answer.

Amen.