

Epiphany 3 A 2020
Matthew 4: 12-23
Creating disciples

In the almost two-decades I lived in the south, I was privy to the extended debate over the scientific validity of the Biblical creation stories. It was one that grew more angry over time and, understanding that this anger was not limited to our region, we had a wonderful vantage point for seeing what looked like armed camps. Courtesy of the newspapers and the radio, we heard of labels stuck to textbooks and then removed, labels disavowing the material inside, people picketing the legislature on the days the bills were introduced. Never mind that there are, of course, at least two creation stories, not counting the one at the beginning of John's gospel, and, if we look hard enough, many more accounts of God taking what was formless and making something that was holy, all of them leaping off the page at us.

And today may be my favorite. In what I learned as the calling of the first disciples, which is the name this story was given in my Sunday school and is confirmed by every Bible in my office, Jesus strides across the hot sands by two fishermen and says ten words: "Follow me and I will make you fishers of people". Immediately, and without a word, Simon and Andrew leave their nets and follow him. Jesus then calls out to James and John, who without even a goodbye to their father, fall into line behind this stranger who has nothing to offer but himself.

The way I was taught this story, it is a remarkable act of faith: men leaving their nets, their families, all on faith and a promise. We have been taught for generations that this dropping of all that is precious to us, the abandonment of all that has meaning for us, should be our own standard of faith. After all, all these men had was those nets and those families, families dependent upon them, and yet as a foursome they walk after this man, only dimly perceiving that they had chosen to participate in something great. This is what faith is, we think, to give up all we have and all we have been, to be a follower, to ask no questions, to abandon what we have or cannot live without. And if we cannot abandon our desks or laptops, walk out of the management meeting or leave the baby behind, at least we have the choices of these men to look to, examples of the trust we would all want to emulate.

But in this season of God made manifest, among all the miracle stories we have heard for weeks now, it's easier to see the whole story as an extension of the creation story, of the God who has spoken the whole world into being. With apologies to years of my own Sunday school teachers and many of you who were taught as I was, I believe this story is not so much about us as it is about God, God who created men who responded at a particular moment to a particular summons. It is about a God who is able to create these people as men who are able to follow, because they needed this thing standing in front of them on the beach; they knew, as children of God, it was the thing they needed to be complete. Immediately, Matthew says, they left their nets because they could not do anything else. They saw the love for which their souls hungered, and they could not do otherwise. Before our eyes, God is creating disciples out of nothing, disciples like you and me.

The calling of the first disciples, so different from what we heard in John's version last week, begins with an echo of Isaiah's prophecy, that for those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light has dawned. If the words sound familiar, it is because we have heard them on Christmas Eve, a reminder of the nearness of the kingdom in this God-made-flesh. It also reminds us that the child born to us, now standing before us at the beginning of his ministry, is the one through whom all things were made; what we are witnessing is the on-going creative work of God, a God made manifest in the response of four men whose hearts were leading them out of the surf and into a story that would transform the world.

In my view, to see it as something other than a miracle is to distort the story, to make it about a quartet of young men valiantly throwing all they knew to the wind and following this stranger whom they could not know. But what they saw was love in front of them and they responded as the whole creation does to the love of God. Immediately, they left their nets, lives and families and were created into something

new, something the world had never seen before. There is no discussion, no hesitation, only the collective hunger for the life of God, the life of the kingdom which cannot help but recreate us all.

In fact, if we look at this story as one of creation rather than leaving all behind, the possibilities for our own lives begin to open. There is nothing more particular than the work of creation, and the particularity of our own lives may mean casting our old nets in different ways, thinking about our lives differently, especially when we walk out of here and look at the world beyond the walls of this church and the crying needs of this community. It is about all of us looking beyond our nets for this figure of love we all hunger for, one who we know is the completion of who we were meant to be. It is this love for which all our souls wait in silence and, when we see it, we are recreated, and the kingdom is born. In fact, it says a great deal about the work we will talk about later today. I believe God is doing a new thing, creating a new thing among us, a people hungry not only for the food ministries for which we are justifiably proud but for the potentials of the wonderful, gifted people in this room. We have many things to talk about in our collective life, not only today but every day. They begin when we recognize the depth of this love of God, and how God has placed among us people who need to follow that love into all corners of our life together. It will always feel incomplete, that there is always work to be done, but that is because God is never through with the work of creation. And that love demands that we listen and act when we can, because following that love is the heart of our discipleship. Much of the time we feel as hapless as these first disciples must have, but we cannot help following anyway, because we were created for this work. Following as the creative act of God means that nothing we do can be too small because it is work that is woven into us. We were made to do what we do, whether it is taking time off to sit with an ailing relative or to spend the extra hours with the family instead of the job that drains us: God is creating us into something new, just as deeply and completely as in Simon and Andrew, in James and John. As William Sloane Coffin put it, "...the power of God is lodged in the very marrow of our substance and is pressing, constantly pressing, for release in order to permeate every fiber of our being." It is this power of God that makes us all into something new, something for which all else we have is lighter than a breath, and when we see that love in front of us, we cannot help stepping out of the surf. We were made to drop our nets, to follow this love across the beach and into a world desperate for the love of the recreated people we are.