

Sermon: Follow Me

Scripture: Matthew 4:12-23

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles – the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned. From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two brothers, James son of Zebedee, and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

After the arrest of John the Baptist, Jesus begins to proclaim that the Kingdom of Heaven is drawing near, a message of good news. Many Christians have difficulty understanding the “Kingdom of Heaven” references in Matthew, and their misunderstandings may shape the way they respond to the call embodied within this section. Jesus’ references here and throughout Matthew, are not teaching about how to go to heaven. They are not about “our escape from this world into another one, but to God’s sovereign rule coming on earth as it is in heaven.” You may need to be reminded that the call of Jesus in this section is not to future salvation, but to contemporary action, to fish for human beings.

When I was growing up, there were several rules in our home. One rule was that there was no television while eating dinner. This rule was broken every Sunday evening, however, because Dad wanted to watch “Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom”.

Sponsored by Mutual of Omaha insurance company, “Wild Kingdom” was a nature program, a precursor to today’s Animal Planet channel. For my father, each episode was a theological journey demonstrating to us all yet once again the wonders of God’s creativity and imagination in the natural world. From the savannas of Kenya to the barrier reef in Australia to the jungles of Borneo, we ate dinner together and watched with fascination as the host introduced new creatures and opened the world to us.

One episode I remember fondly was about the elephant seals of Argentina. The show focused on a mother and her seal pup, who had been born. Soon after birthing her baby, the mother, now famished, abandoned the pup on the shore so she could go feed in the rich waters off the coast. After feeding, she returned to a different part of the beach and began to call for her baby. Other mothers had done the exact same thing, and all had returned at a similar time; I remember thinking they would never find one another. The camera then followed the mother as she called to her pup and listened for the response. Following each other’s voices and scents, soon the mother and pup were reunited.

The host explained that, from the moment of birth, the sound and scent of the pup are imprinted in the mother’s memory, and the sound and scent of the mother are imprinted in the pup’s memory. This fascinated me especially when Dad turned to me and said, “You know that’s how it is with God. We are imprinted with the memory of God, and God is imprinted with a memory of us” and even if it takes a lifetime, we will find each other.

The text from Matthew’s Gospel describes the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. Matthew describes Jesus’ walking by the Sea of Galilee and calling the first four of his disciples. All fishermen, he called them to follow him. Matthew says they immediately left what they were doing and followed Jesus. As readers, we are struck by this idea that immediately they left what they were doing. It is as if they were

compelled to follow Jesus and to obey him, almost as if they had been waiting all their lives to hear this voice, to be issued this call, so that when it came, they dropped what they were doing.

Augustine opens the first book of his “Confessions” with the prayer and statement that “Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.”

Indeed, it would seem that even these four who were already in a worthy vocation had restless hearts – so restless that when it came, they heard Jesus’ call to them, they could do nothing else but leave everything behind and follow. Perhaps they were simply responding to what had already been imprinted on their souls from birth – the knowledge of the voice of God – so that when they heard the voice, all they could do was obey.

I wish the task of discernment was that easy. In one sense, it may be; but in another sense, it is so complicated because it seems that the voices – many of whom are claiming to be God’s voice – are so numerous these days. This is why the last verse in today’s reading is so important. The reading for today does not end with disciples following Jesus. The reading ends by reminding us of what Jesus sets about doing, as these four and others become his disciples. Jesus goes throughout Galilee, “teaching in synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people” (v.23)

It is our responsibility, in the midst of the many voices calling to us, to know the person of God so well that we are able to discern what voices are consistent with the God who created us in God’s own image, redeemed us through God’s only son, and sustains us by God’s Spirit in and through the body of Christ.

In last week’s lesson from the Gospel of John, Jesus encouraged those who had questions to “Come and see”. In this lesson, he calls disciples directly, encouraging the fishermen to “Follow Me”. In this opening moment in the ministry of Jesus, when he has begun to call others to join him, we can see the moment when things begin to change: “From that time Jesus began to proclaim, Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near” (v.17). All of us face such a moment in our lives, or many such moments, that challenges our center of gravity, that wants to shift it from a story of self to one that will mean something in a larger context.

What things in our community are struggling to be born?

Can our community begin a major project? Have spiritual seeds been planted in our community just waiting to sprout?

Many stories begin with a Call to adventure. In the movie “The Matrix”, Neo (Keanu Reeves) is sought out by Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne), a man who joins others in telling Neo that he is called to change the world. In the novel and film versions of “The Fellowship of the Ring”, Frodo Baggins is urged by the wizard Gandalf to leave behind his comfortable existence and set out on a quest. In both cases, the characters are confronted with a call that will change their own lives completely. How we respond to the call is also a topic worthy of examination. Simon Peter and Andrew – and later, James and John – are said to have responded to this call straightaway. These fishermen did not pause to think; they did not consult their families bank account balances. Jesus called and they responded.

To what does Jesus call us? Too often perhaps, we answer that question in terms that do not require enough of us. Some Christians would say we are called to belief; others would say to church membership; others would say to service. Others would say it is all these and more.

The call to “Follow Me” was a call “to absolute discipleship”, and that only in surrendering ourselves to Jesus’ command could we know our greatest joy. Do not be afraid to use Jesus’ radical call – and the radical response of the first disciples – to call our own congregation to give all that they have for something worth infinitely more.

PRAYER: Watching and waiting for the coming of Christ, we pray for the promise of a new creation, saying: come quickly, Lord; our hope is in you. God our hope, as the promised day approaches, fill us with the joy of your Holy Spirit and strengthen us to serve you faithfully; through Christ, who is coming to reign. AMEN.

BENEDICTION:

Jesus' call to radical obedience has not changed over the years; the demands have not been reduced. Jesus waits not for the persons to apply to him in hopes of learning under him, as many young Jewish males would have done. Instead, rabbi Jesus is the one who seeks out followers, learners, apprentices who do not have to qualify for such a relationship, save the willingness to lay down everything else. What a call! What a mission! What a Savior! GO IN PEACE