

Isaiah 9:1-4
Psalm 27:1, 5-13
1 Corinthians 1:10-18
Matthew 4:12-23

Drop everything! Come right now! Hurry up! Do it quickly! Why aren't you ready? This is what I sound like standing in my garage with the car door open trying to get my children into the car for an outing that I have invited them to and am convinced will absolutely change their lives. Are you coming? I'm waiting!

Jesus speaks to James and John, the sons of Zebedee and Simon Peter and Andrew in the same way. "Come now!" Jesus says. "Stop what you're doing. Drop your nets and come with me. I have work for you to do that will absolutely change your life. Drop your nets! Get out of the boat. Come with me! I'm going to make you fishers of men." Incredulously, they do exactly what Jesus says. They drop what they are doing, walk away from their boats and their families, their homes, their circle of friends and all they have known in life and they follow Jesus into unknown territory on an unspecified mission.

Who does that? What rational, sane person would ever do that? It sounds crazy and irresponsible. And yet, that's what Jesus asks his disciples to do and they do it! Most of us can't imagine doing anything that radical, so you have to wonder about the power of the physical presence of Jesus.

The gospel lesson this morning tells us that when John the Baptist was handed over to Herod and imprisoned, Jesus left his hometown, Nazareth, and settled in the city of Capernaum near the Sea of Galilee. Capernaum is on a major trade route where lots of people from lots of places are coming and going. This move puts Jesus exactly where God wants him and fulfills the scripture from Isaiah that we just heard in the Old Testament reading today and again in the gospel.

"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."

Galilee...the land beyond the Jordan...Gentile territory. Jesus begins his ministry not in the heart of Israel, but in Gentile territory teeming with foreigners. And it's there that he calls his first disciples. Jesus calls ordinary people while they are doing ordinary work. These people don't have advanced academic degrees. They didn't undergo multiple scrutinies by committees and mentors. They do not possess highly valuable skill sets that are sought after in the job market. They are fishermen...just good, hard-working fishermen. But they have one valuable quality that Jesus spots in them. They have open hearts and open and curious minds and they could

hear the Master's voice when he called. They recognized the compelling nature of Jesus and the urgency of Jesus' call to them.

Jesus is still calling disciples...today...in 2020...right here in northern Virginia. Jesus is saying to us "Drop everything and come with me." And then again, "Are you coming?" because sometimes Jesus has to ask more than once. Jesus is still not looking for the academically accomplished. He's still not looking for folks with skills sets that are valuable in the marketplace. He's looking for ordinary people doing ordinary jobs. And he's still looking for people with open hearts and a willingness to hear him when he calls and a desire to respond to that call. In all likelihood, however, we are not going to quit our jobs or sell our homes and move out of town. But consider this: maybe following Jesus does not require us to do all that literally. Perhaps God has already put us exactly where he wants us just as God put Jesus in Galilee...the land of the Gentiles...exactly where he wanted him.

Every person in this room has been called by God to some task or ministry. You wouldn't be here in this sanctuary if that were not the case. God calls each of us in different ways and to different situations...and perhaps God is not calling us to new vocations or new jobs. Perhaps God has already put us exactly where he wants us. The call, you see, is not about vocation. It's not about what you do for a living. The call is about entering into relationship with God, with Jesus and with those around us. God has put in our lives the people that he wants us to reach. God has put the fish right in front of us and all around us. All we need to do is reach out to them and share our own experiences of God. We need to show them what God is like...to give them a glimpse of God in how we make them feel...not an explanation of God, but an experience of God.

As he begins his ministry in and around Galilee, Jesus keeps saying to people..."the kingdom of God has come near!" This is good news! But many of us miss it. As Anglican bishop and Biblical scholar N. T. Wright explains, the 'kingdom of God' references we hear from Jesus are difficult to understand. Jesus' references here and throughout the gospel of Matthew 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.'¹ Remember the words of the Lord's prayer? "Thy will be done *on earth as it is in heaven*". The call of Jesus in this scripture is not to future salvation, but to contemporary action...to fish for human beings now...working toward making God's kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven...in present time.

Last Monday evening, in honor of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, we had a service of Holy Eucharist here and we read aloud excerpts from his 'Letter from Birmingham Jail.' It is a treatise on the work he was doing that he saw as God's work in this world. Along the way, many other people felt a heart-tug...a call...to join him in that civil rights work. Some of them left their homes, their families, their jobs, and security to answer God's call to them. Some of them weathered the storm just fine. And some of them lost everything...including their lives. But they answered God's call and they found God putting them exactly where God wanted them to be.

Dr. King mentioned in his letter that “Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men...and women...willing to be co workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation.”² Those people who joined Dr. King in his work were answering God’s call to them to get involved in the civil rights movement. The call from God is a ‘heart tug.’...something that you feel compelled to respond to...something that you just can’t ‘not do.’ And that can happen in any situation in which we find ourselves.

But consider this: Maybe we aren’t being asked to abandon our jobs and our homes and our families in order to be disciples. Maybe we are being asked to abandon attitudes that prevent us from seeing the possibilities for the world in the same way God sees those possibilities. Maybe it’s about having our eyes opened to recognizing injustice where we’ve never seen it before. Or maybe it’s only about having a good relationship with someone else. Maybe it’s a family member who has hurt us or a co-worker that just annoys the daylights out of us. Maybe it’s a parent or a child who has disappointed us. Who in your life is taking up so much space in your thoughts that you hardly have a chance to think of anything or anyone else? Which of your co-workers, schoolmates or family members is proving to be difficult for you? All of us have those folks in our lives. What is Jesus calling us to do to forget ourselves and bear witness to him in these relationships?

As Jesus began his ministry, the gospel tells us that he went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news that the kingdom of God had come near. He went about curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Chances are, though, that even as devout disciples, we are not going to be curing every disease and every sickness we encounter among the people that God has put in our lives just by virtue of our love for God and our faith in Jesus. We aren’t necessarily going to be able to set a broken arm: but we can mend a broken heart. A kind word...a reaffirming statement...a willing ear to listen...may be all we need to provide to soothe that heart.

We probably aren’t going to be able to restore sight to someone whose vision is impaired or perhaps for one who has gone completely blind: but we can help someone see a situation differently...maybe in a way that will restore a relationship and help both people feel better.

We probably aren’t going to cure all the mental and emotional issues that we encounter: but we can sit down next to a kid in the cafeteria who is eating alone or ask someone that we notice usually gets left out to join us. And we can put our arms around a person who is grieving a loss and love them and be with them without ever uttering a word.

Jesus is talking about *evangelism*. He’s talking about sharing our experiences of God and of Jesus with folks who haven’t had those experiences...or didn’t recognize them as encounters with God. One of my very favorite evangelical slogans is one attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: “preach the gospel always: if necessary, use words.” Emotional pain can actually be felt

physically and we can help ease that pain by taking just a few minutes to notice and then acting on our empathy and kindness.

Jesus is still calling us to be his disciples. He is still telling us to “Drop everything!” He is still saying to us, “Are you coming?” He still wants us to set aside what is important to *us* and attend to the people he has put in our lives. Being Jesus’ disciple is not about making things work out the way we want or getting our own needs met or even being sure that people embrace the gospel itself. It is about being aware of others. And being willing to believe the best about people when the information is ambiguous. It’s the loving thing to do for them and the most peaceful thing to do for ourselves. Sharing the kingdom is so often about our own attitudes and how we behave with other people in a loving way.

As we pursue our discipleship with Jesus, we know, too, that we are taking some risks. We might fail. The way to the cross with Jesus is full of pitfalls and danger. It’s not an easy road. We may fail at sharing the good news of the kingdom and the power of God’s love. And we may feel rejected. We need to keep going anyway. Our motives may be questioned. Keep going anyway. Our goodwill may be spurned. Keep going anyway. We don’t really want to do it. Keep going anyway.

Our discipleship is not about changing anyone else. Jesus did **not** say, “Go ye into all the world and make sure that everyone comes to believe in me the same way you do.” He said, “Go ye into all the world and **tell** everyone about me.” Our discipleship is about changing us and about our relationship with Jesus. Answering his call is to enter into a relationship with him that binds us to him in every important way. How would *your* life change, if you truly set all cares aside except for the ones that Jesus brings to your attention? How would *your* life change if you were more concerned with the welfare of the people God has put in your life than you were about your own? How close would the kingdom of God come to *you* if you deepen your realization of the incarnation of God in Jesus and answer his call with an open heart and a willingness to change yourself?

Jesus is still calling. He’s no longer calling the fishermen; He is calling YOU with a sense of urgency. Drop everything! Answer Jesus now! And he is insistent: “Are you coming?” Set aside all the cares about your own life and begin to focus on what God is asking you to do in the lives of those he has put before you. Therein lies your greatest joy, your greatest sense of peace and your deepest sense of fulfillment. The fish are all around you.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN

¹N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008) 18.

²King, Jr., Rev. Dr. Martin Luther, *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, April 16, 1963.