

“Follow Me”

The Reverend Allison Caudill

St. Luke's Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky

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Now I told y'all two weeks ago that our brother John the Baptist would be showing up in my sermon again this week. What I didn't tell you is that this time, John himself does not walk through the scene, or have any lines of speech. Instead, we begin our story with the news of John's arrest, and the end of his public ministry. John is never released from prison, and is ultimately put to death for his radical message of warning to the powers and principalities of this world. Although we know that John sends a message to Jesus through his followers from prison, and the Messiah replies to him with a word of hope, the two men never meet again. So why even mention him at all? What does the arrest of the man who baptized him have to do with this next chapter in the story of God's only Son?

Jesus has left the place that was familiar to him, the place where his parents raised him in safety and love. After hearing that the prophet in the wilderness has been arrested, Jesus moves to a new and unfamiliar place, a wilderness of his own, and takes up the cry. Notice the words that Jesus proclaims. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Are those words familiar to you? They would have been familiar to the now leaderless followers of John the Baptist. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. These are John's words, his message from God for which he was vilified, captured, incarcerated, and killed. These are words that could get someone killed. These are words worth dying for. From the moment that Jesus begins to proclaim this message, to make this call for repentance and kingdom living, he is telling the world that John was right. He is telling the people who followed John into the Jordan that their faith has not been in vain, and their forgiveness has come near. Jesus cries out that the kingdom of heaven has come near, and he does not mean a lofty future city on the clouds for the self-righteous and the mighty. Jesus is not proclaiming an idea, or even an ideal. Jesus is proclaiming the truth. The kingdom of heaven has come near. Jesus is introducing himself.

And now, as we say farewell to John, we meet our old familiar friends. Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John, the first followers of Jesus we learn to call by name. The Gospels differ on the details of each disciple's call story, as we heard in John's version of this story last week. But this story, this scene in the Gospel of Matthew, might just be the most well-known. Having grown up at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church here in Louisville, I can tell you that I knew the words Jesus spoke to Simon and Andrew well before I really knew who Simon and Andrew were. Follow me, and I will make you fish for people. Immediately, they left their nets and followed him. Those two lines have ignited the imagination of Christians for generations, and have had a huge impact on religious art and symbolism since the birth of the Church. What clarity. How concise and uncomplicated. Follow me, and I will make you fish for people. Immediately they followed him. James and John do the same, immediately they followed him. It just seems so easy. The greatest

model of conversion imaginable, immediate and unquestioning obedience of the call of God on our lives, regardless of what must be given up in the process.

Often we encounter this story as if it revolved entirely around the word “immediately.” The focus is usually on the unquestioning, unflinching, wholehearted acceptance of Jesus and dedication to becoming his follower. But that is not, in fact, the heart of the story. Two sets of brothers cast their nets, because they are fishermen. Jesus calls them, not to be students or leaders or even evangelists. Jesus calls them to fish for people. Because he isn’t calling four scholars, or four monks, or four politicians. In this moment, Jesus calls four fishermen. And four fishermen leave their nets and their boats behind to follow someone who calls them because of who they are. Becoming fishers of people has always been an obvious and beautiful image of evangelism and deep Gospel work. It is an image that connects us to the roots of Christianity, to our first role models the imperfect but wholehearted apostles. It is a tangible, visceral image of physical labor and nourishment, of the natural world meeting our most basic needs. It is a clear call to action, and a familiar one.

Becoming a follower of Jesus is not an application or selection process. There are no prerequisites or qualifications. Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John are responding to the one who sees who they truly are, and what they are capable of. The disciples leave behind their nets, not their selves. Jesus calls to them not with an invitation to change who they are, but with a challenge to change how and where they cast their nets. Their skills, their profession, their livelihood are not irrelevant to their discipleship, but deeply rooted in it. On the sea of Galilee they performed life-sustaining work. Jesus invites them now to learn how to do life-giving work in his name.

We know that we are called to do this same life-giving work. We are called to continue in their footsteps of discipleship, of following Jesus and spreading the Good News in his name. You and me, we have the same call on our lives. “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” So what if you aren’t a fisherman? What if your work, your skills, your identity are different? Are we all called to be fishers of people?

I don’t think we are. I do not believe that we are all called to be fishers of people. I think we are called first and foremost to hear the first two words of Christ to his disciples, and understand that everything else comes from them. Follow me. That is our call. The second part, the vocation part, is HOW we follow. James and John, Simon Peter and Andrew, they were fishermen. That is how they followed Jesus. You’re not a fisherman? Good. Follow Jesus and he will make you teachers of people. Follow Jesus and he will make you healers of people. Follow Jesus and he will make you builders and preachers and caregivers and peacemakers and artists and stewards and leaders of people. Follow Jesus, and bring your whole self to the work you do in his name. Follow Jesus, and let him teach you how.