

Third Sunday after the Epiphany January 22, 2023

Psalm 22:23–31

Matthew 4:18–25

“Gone Fishing”

1. It had been a bright, breezy morning when Jesus first called them. Years later, Simon Peter and Andrew would still tell the story of that day, when their world changed forever.
 - a. That morning, however, had started feeling entirely ordinary.
 - b. The night had brought in some fish, and in the morning they were still able to cast nets for a different variety of fish in a different area of the Sea of Galilee.
 - c. The two brothers barely eked out a living as fishermen, but that is what they had done their entire life, and that is what their family had done for as long as anyone could remember.
2. Fishing was hard work, but so was every other trade.
 - a. And they felt this was their lot in life. What else could they do?
 - b. They were too old to learn another trade.
 - c. They had not shown enough promise to have been chosen by the rabbis to learn the scriptures.
 - d. They didn't belong to the more affluent families in Capernaum, so there was not much of a chance of changing their circumstances.
3. The way things worked, they were under oppressive conditions to pay exorbitant fees and taxes to the Romans and their local representatives.
 - a. The more you fished, the more the Romans wanted.
 - b. There was no way to get ahead selling at the market, because there was no time for that.
 - c. How do you fish and then spend time trying to sell it?
 - d. But, again, that was true of anyone who could apply their trade, be it farming, or fishing, or tanning leather, or whatever.
4. On that side of the Sea of Galilee, by the city of Capernaum, some places don't have sandy beaches but instead the beaches have medium and large round rocks, which makes it tricky to walk around at the water's edge.
 - a. Simon Peter and Andrew were negotiating the terrain and casting out into the sea when they heard someone a few feet behind them talking to them.
5. They turned around and they recognized him.
 - a. It was a teacher, a rabbi, who had not been in town long.
 - b. They had heard him speak at the synagogue.
 - c. There was certainly something different about him. Little did they know how different!
 - d. The teacher repeated himself, now that he had their attention:
 - e. “I said, follow me, and I will make you fish for people!”

6. Simon Peter and Andrew looked at each other, looked at their nets, and looked back at the rabbi.
 - a. Maybe this was their chance for a change, for an opportunity even to get to be part of a rabbi's following or school.
 - b. Almost without hesitation, they left their nets behind, signaling to a neighbor as they walked by him that he and his family could have their nets.
 - c. They wouldn't be needing them anymore.
7. Just down the shore they encountered James and John and old man Zebedee in their boat, as they were mending their nets.
 - a. And again, the rabbi called out to them, and they too left it all behind and followed.
 - b. Simon Peter and Andrew of course knew Zebedee's boys, and they knew how poor they all were. They also knew how much fishing was in their blood.
 - c. Their families had lived in or near Capernaum for as long as any of them could remember.
8. Here were ordinary people pulled out of their ordinary tasks. They had no idea how out of the ordinary their life would become.
 - a. Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John were now following after this traveling rabbi, Jesus, who was making his way around the area of Galilee to teach in the synagogues.
 - b. He had a prophet's message of repentance, about turning one's life back to God, speaking of the Realm of God as something that was near them, all around them.
9. But what soon began to make the crowds grow was his ability to heal people.
 - a. He just had a way with people who were sick, so of course everyone was bringing their sick to him so he could touch them, heal them, bless them.
 - b. As you might expect, that kind of news travels fast! People would travel for days just for the hope of finding healing.
10. Early on in their time with Jesus, it seemed to these former fishermen that when people connected with the rabbi, that lives changed.
 - a. Just look at them!
 - b. They had traded nets for the chance to sit and listen to stories the rabbi shared.
11. And they kept thinking about how he said they'd be fishing for people, and how it felt like they were casting a wide net so people would know about the rabbi, and they could come learn from him also.
 - a. People who were healed followed him.
 - b. People who wanted to be rabbis followed him.
 - c. People who had lost faith followed him.
 - d. People who had been pushed aside by the community followed him.
 - e. More and more people gathered every Sabbath, it seemed.
12. His message resonated with them.
 - a. A reminder of the liberation the people of God had found from the beginning, with God freeing them, guiding them, nurturing them, CALLING them.

- b. They sang about that liberating God with Psalms in synagogues and homes.
 - c. The people needed liberation, not just of their minds, but of their social pressures.
 - d. They needed to feel that God cared for those who were chewed up and spit out by the machine of all-powerful Rome, and felt the disdain of the collaborators with the Romans
13. Looking back years later, it would have been hard for these fishermen not to layer on top of stories of those early days the knowledge of things to come,
- a. like the increasing tension with the religious authorities,
 - b. or that some people thought the rabbi was the Messiah from God,
 - c. or the teachings he shared which fundamentally changed how they understood the scriptures,
 - d. or the collision course with the Romans who had been keeping an eye on the charismatic rabbi and on his growing crowd of followers.
 - e. But if they held all those later memories off for a moment,
 - i. if they tried to feel how it all felt at the start,
 - ii. they remembered how it had been difficult to feel disconnected so completely from who they had been and from their hometown.
 - f. It had been a gamble to follow. There were no guarantees.
14. But they knew it was necessary for gaining a new identity, because they had been changed.
- a. Oddly, they still felt like fishermen.
 - b. They missed the sea even if they didn't miss the struggles.
 - c. But to be fishing for people, as he had said, now that made them think they had a higher calling from God.
15. Maybe it was the same for those other fellow early followers,
- a. if they had been carpenters they probably felt they were building up the realm of God,
 - b. or if they had been farmers they would now be sowing seeds of the good news,
 - c. or if they had been seamstresses they could picture themselves stitching a community of believers together.
16. Do we ever wonder what that call may have felt like for us?
- a. Do we wonder how we would have answered that rabbi trying to call us from our labor to God's labor?
 - b. Maybe the trouble is that we think of it as a big huge call, a life-changing moment.
 - i. Sure, it seemed that way for those fishermen.
 - ii. Maybe if we think of it as an incremental set of calls from God, like a persistent rabbi trying to recruit followers, then maybe we can picture what our reaction could have been.
17. The reality is that we are in a constant conversation with God, and God keeps inviting us in a direction of service, of reflection, of commitment.

- a. And we, without a dramatic call by the windswept Sea of Galilee, are nevertheless responding.
 - i. You agreed to say yes when God called you (through the voice of a fellow member) to become an elder or a deacon.
 - ii. Or called you to teach Sunday school.
 - iii. Or called you to return to church after years of absence.
 - iv. Or called you to stand up against racism or sexism in your workplace.
 - v. Or called you to start reading Bible stories to you child or grandchild.
18. The call (or calls) from God come in unexpected moments, in ordinary moments.
- a. If the roar of the wind by the Sea of Galilee had been louder, and the voice of Jesus had been drowned out, and Simon Peter and Andrew hadn't turned around, then it would have continued being an ordinary moment.
19. I mentioned to some of you last week how I'm in a journey to listen more intently to God speaking.
- a. My spiritual director will help me be attentive,
 - b. a book recommended by a colleague will open my mind,
 - c. a moment of intentionally stopping and listening will offer an ordinary moment.
 - d. Maybe God will use that moment to say something.
 - e. Or maybe God will use the conversation with a new neighbor on the check out line at the grocery store to get my attention.
20. I won't have a way of knowing when an ordinary moment will become an extra ordinary moment.
- a. And I put my trust in God that, if I miss it, if I don't turn around, God will be patient and persistent and keep asking me and you to put down our nets and go fish for people, or our hammer and come build the realm of God, or our plow to go plant seeds of the gospel, or our needle and thread to stitch together community.

Sources

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