

Psalm 27:1-9
Matthew 4:12-23

3rd Sunday After Epiphany, Year A
Midway Presbyterian Church
January 22, 2023

A Tale of Four Fishermen

Introduction to the Psalm

Our Psalm this morning is credited to David. It's a favorite of many because its central theme of "trust in the Lord" is expressed so beautifully. Like Psalm 23, it teaches us what real trust is like. And those who meditate on its words are in fact led toward that very trust. Listen to Psalm 27:1-9. . .

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

Our Gospel Lesson this morning is found in the fourth chapter of Matthew. Here we learn that John the Baptist has been arrested. Jesus then leaves Nazareth and makes his home in Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee. He now begins to preach, saying "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Then he calls four fishermen to follow him and become "fishers of people." He teaches throughout Galilee, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing the sick. Listen to these words from Matthew 4:12-23. . .

Sermon

For Matthew, Jesus' ministry begins and ends in a region where insiders and outsiders mingle—Galilee of the Gentiles. It begins right after learning that John the Baptist has been arrested because of his reproving Herod Antipas for taking his brother Phillip's wife.

Now Matthew is quite interested in how Jesus fulfills prophecy (4:14). With the recollection of the Zebulun and Naphtali of Isaiah 9, Matthew sees Jesus' journey to Galilee as part of God's redemptive plan, as the prophet had proclaimed centuries before. The saving light

is for the Jewish people “who sat in darkness.” It is a land claimed by Rome, marked by darkness, taxes, and death. But it is more than that. “Galilee of the Gentiles” points to a mission beyond the Jews—“to make disciples of all nations.” (Mt. 28:16-20) The commission of Israel to be a “light to all nations” is fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth.

So, as the ministry of John the Baptist ends, the ministry of Jesus begins. It will be a ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing in Galilee, where people live in darkness. We don’t expect to see much light in the dark ghettos of major U. S. cities, like Chicago, where on average about two people a day are murdered. Yet if the message of Matthew 4 were heard by those living there—parents and gangs; law enforcement; political, religious, and educational leaders—they could hear a message of hope for places where people live “in the valley of the shadow of death.” Jesus announces not only hope, but also a warning: in the light of God’s new activity people must repent of wrongdoing.

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. (Mt. 4:17)

It’s noteworthy that, unlike John the Baptist, here Jesus says very little about the sins of the people. Rather, repentance here is more a call to turn around, change direction, operate from a new set of values—to live under the reign of God. “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” Repent. Become a follower of Jesus Christ. Turn away from self-centeredness. Turn to Christ and let him be the center of your life.

The kingdom of heaven is not just an ideal, something to hope for at the end of time, but something that has begun in Jesus Christ. Even with signs of Roman occupation all around, the light has come in the midst of darkness. It’s time to turn around, and live in the light of the kingdom of heaven.

Now the Sea of Galilee was really a large lake—33 miles in circumference with a maximum depth of 141 feet. It had about thirty fishing towns surrounding it during Jesus' day, and Capernaum was the largest of those towns. Well, next we find Jesus walking by the Sea of Galilee and calling four fishermen to follow him and join in the work of his kingdom. These were probably men at the lower end of the socio-economic order. They were manual laborers. Jesus doesn't ask any questions about their education, their abilities, nor their availability. He just says:

“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” (4:20)

Jesus calls two sets of brothers: Simon Peter and Andrew, who have only nets with which to fish from the shore of the lake; and James and John, who are part of a family fishing business with a boat.

Perhaps these four had heard Jesus preaching. According to John 1 (35-42), Jesus had previously talked with Peter and Andrew. At any rate, without hesitation they respond to the call of Jesus. Jesus summons with an authority that is irresistible, and the four rise up and follow him. They will give up the security of the familiar work of fishing for fish, in order to follow Jesus and to help others find this “light that shines in the darkness.” They are to spread the gospel net broadly and catch as many as they can for Christ and his church.

Rodger Nishioka taught at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, and is now the Senior Associate Pastor and Director of Adult Faith Formation at Village Presbyterian Church in Prairie Village, Kansas. Rodger tells the story of growing up in a home where there were several rules. And one rule was that there was no television while eating dinner. However, this rule was set aside every Sunday evening because “Dad wanted to watch Mutual of Omaha's

‘Wild Kingdom.’” The father, also a Presbyterian minister, saw each episode as a theological journey demonstrating the wonders of God’s creativity and imagination in the natural world.

From the savannahs 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.

Rodger Nishioka recalls fondly one episode of “Wild Kingdom” about the elephant seals of Argentina. A mother seal had just given birth to her pup. And shortly the mother, now famished, left the pup on the shore and went in search of food in the rich waters off the coast. After feeding, she returned to a different part of the beach and began to call for her newborn baby. Other mothers had done the same. Rodger wondered how the mothers would ever find their pups. Well, the camera followed the mother as she called to her baby and listened for a response. Happily, following each other’s voices and scents, mother and pup were reunited.

The host then explained that from the moment of birth, the sound and scent of the mother are imprinted in the pup’s memory. To which Rodger’s father said,

You know, that’s how it is with God. We are imprinted with a memory of God, and God is imprinted with a memory of us, and even if it takes a lifetime, we will find each other.

When Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee and called the four fishermen to follow him, they left what they were accustomed to and immediately followed Jesus. It was like they had been waiting all their lives to hear this call, and when it came, they dropped what they were doing and followed him. Perhaps Peter, Andrew, James, and John were simply responding to what had been imprinted on their souls from birth—the knowledge of the voice of God. So that when they heard the voice of Jesus call, all they could do was to answer in obedience.

Now one way to look at the call of the four fishermen is to see it as “a call to adventure.” Not only does Matthew 4 present the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, but the beginning of ministry for those he calls to follow him and fish for people. Four fishermen would begin a great adventure.

I think it would be helpful as we begin a new year of mission and ministry here at Midway to consider ourselves called to a great adventure. We have new chairpersons on our four committees and the opportunity for many of you to serve on one or more of these committees. We have a Vision Team that will be meeting to try to discern the way God is leading us into the future. Let us not see the task ahead as simply planning to continue the same old plans and programs. But rather let us see this time as a call to adventure—as hearers and followers of the voice of Jesus Christ. Matthew records the tale of four fishermen. What will be the tale of Midway this year?

This “call to adventure” can not only be applied to our life as a congregation, but also to our individual lives. What is one new thing that God would have us do in this year of 2023? Might it be something in regard to our health over which we have some control? Might it be something in regard to a relationship that needs attention? Might it be something about our support of the church? Might it be something in regard to our devotional life? Our educational life? Our work?

Whatever we might hear God calling us to do, it will likely involve change. And change can be difficult, especially for those of us who are getting older. We get set in our ways. And you know what they say: “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” Well, we may not be able to learn new tricks, but with God’s help we *can* make changes. What if we could see God’s call to address something in our lives as a “call to adventure”? As beginning a journey, a pilgrimage if

you will, with the expectation that along the way we will experience wonderful things that we had never imagined.

Psalm 27 calls us to put our trust in the Lord who is our “light and our salvation, the stronghold of our life,” the source of our strength. David knew that strength in dealing with the giant Goliath. Joshua found that strength in leading the people of Israel. Paul knew that strength dealing with his thorn in the flesh, with shipwreck and imprisonment. John in exile on the Island of Patmos knew that strength in writing the Book of Revelation. And Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew that strength in standing up to the Nazis in Germany some 80 years ago.

My friends, we don't have to be overcome by fear of anything—any change, any disease, any terrorists—even death itself. For in the day of trouble he will hide us in his shelter, conceal us under the cover of his tent; he will set us high on a rock. He is our rock and our salvation.

Our Good Shepherd.

So let us, like the four fishermen of Matthew 4, rise up and follow Jesus. Let us answer his call to faith, to discipleship, to casting wide the net of the gospel, drawing others into its joys. Let us answer his call to build a peaceable, loving community here at Midway. A community that will offer people an alternative to a broken world of divisiveness, hatred, and ill-will. A peaceable community that does its part in bringing the light of Christ into valleys of deep darkness.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.