

Sermon Matthew 4:13-23 January 29, 2017

When Jesus got word that John had been arrested, He returned to Galilee. He moved from His hometown, Nazareth, to the lakeside village Capernaum, nestled at the base of the Zebulun and Naphtali hills. This move completed Isaiah's sermon:

*Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,  
road to the sea, over Jordan,  
Galilee, crossroads for the nations.  
People sitting out their lives in the dark  
saw a huge light;  
Sitting in that dark, dark country of death,  
they watched the sun come up.*

This Isaiah-prophesied sermon came to life in Galilee the moment Jesus started preaching. He picked up where John left off: "Change your life. God's kingdom is here." Walking along the beach of Lake Galilee, Jesus saw two brothers: Simon (later called Peter) and Andrew. They were fishing, throwing their nets into the lake. It was their regular work. Jesus said to them, "Come with Me. I'll make a new kind of fisherman out of you. I'll show you how to catch men and women instead of perch and bass." They didn't ask questions, but simply dropped their nets and followed.

A short distance down the beach they came upon another pair of brothers, James and John, Zebedee's sons. These two were sitting in a boat with their father, Zebedee, mending their fishnets. Jesus made the same offer to them, and they were just as quick to follow, abandoning boat and father.

From there Jesus went all over Galilee. He used synagogues for meeting places and taught people the truth of God. God's kingdom was His theme - that beginning right now they were under God's government, a good government! Jesus also healed people of their diseases and of the bad effects of their bad lives. Word got around the entire Roman province of Syria.

People brought anybody with an ailment, whether mental, emotional, or physical. Jesus healed them, one and all. Matthew 4:12-23 (The Message)

In high school gym, I never put my face or my head in the water in swim class, because my hair and makeup were my priorities, and that pretty much made all sports I was forced to participate in, spectator sports. I'm not saying this with any sense of achievement, and looking in the rearview mirror (literally and figuratively) it was short-sighted of me to be so vain and to have such a tiny mirror with which to view myself. "Spectator" is one of the words that used to describe my life... I was shy, afraid of looking stupid, unwilling to try and fail, and spent too much time worrying about how I

appeared to other people. I met Jesus when I was 18 years old. I'd known about Him before that - growing up in church and going to Sunday school - but when I was 18 I "met" Him; He became real to me and experiencing His love became a priority. One of the things I've learned about Jesus is that following Him isn't a spectator sport. He didn't say, "Watch Me", or "Sit and listen about Me", He said, "Follow Me."

I've always understood Jesus' words from today's gospel, (this is from the Living Bible) "'Come with Me and I will show you how to fish for the souls of humanity," to mean that the Christian's job, when following Jesus, is to save others... from a life of sin, and death, and hell. I've pictured the Christian's fishing net to be more of a butterfly net that we would "catch" someone in order to save them, and then they would believe as we believe, and pray as we pray, and worship as we worship, and if that didn't happen then the "catch" didn't take... the bait was inadequate, the fish got away.

But as Jesus has been doing God's slow, transforming work in me, God's slow child, I have come to a different image of that fishing net. Jesus caught me in His net with unconditional love, and a meaningful life, and forgiveness for my foolishness, as bait. He caught me in His net in order to give me abundant life. I've come to see the fishing net as a safety net that Jesus uses to scoop us up out of the dangerous and deadly waters of our brokenness and sin, in order to give us a new identity as "God's Child" and "Beloved" and "New Creation."

This story of Jesus calling the disciples to "fish for the souls of humanity" is at the beginning of His ministry. Later He would explain His ministry to those who were following Him... some of them His friends, and some His enemies, hell-bent on catching

Jesus in some punishable offense. Jesus said, (again this is from the Living Bible) “My purpose is to give life, in all its fullness.”

Some of us come to know Jesus as little children with trusting faith; some of us come to know Him as adults with more logical belief; and some of us, who’ve messed up so often that we fear we might have missed the boat, are taken by surprise by being caught in Jesus’ outstretched arms and open heart. Wherever in life we are when we meet Jesus His purpose is to give us life... “in all its fullness.”

Now I understand the fisher’s net that Jesus gives to us, His followers, as a safety net we use to scoop up helpless and hopeless men and women, so that they can experience in Jesus... “life in all its fullness.” We might all have different lists of life in all its fullness but there are characteristics the church recognizes as signs of the Holy Spirit, signs of life in all its fullness... among them love, joy, peace, patience, and kindness. Life in all its fullness includes God’s shalom, which means that there is enough for everyone: all are fed, all are valued, all are safe, all are welcome. Shalom means more than peace; it encompasses “God’s protection and God’s provision” for all the world. When we are fishers of the human soul we, like Christ, throw a safety net to anyone we meet who is struggling to keep their head above water. And like Jesus, we don’t ask their income or ethnicity or religion or sexual orientation... we just throw them that net that holds the promise of life in all its fullness... the same net that Jesus has thrown to us.

There is a lot of darkness in the world right now, but this is the season of Epiphany... the season of light, when we remember the wise men... outsiders, heathen, and foreigners... who followed the star that led to the Christ-child, and brought Him

precious gifts, and worshiped Him. It was those foreigners, those outsiders, who led us to an understanding (which is an Epiphany!) that Jesus didn't come to save only the conventional religious folks... He came to save all the world. During Epiphany we remember the light from the star shined so brightly and persistently that the wise men followed it and were guided by it. During Epiphany we remember (again) that we are meant to be light that shines so brightly and persistently that people are able to see Jesus in us. And we come to church, gathering as the community of saints and sinners (and we are all both saints and sinners) because there's just no way to shine, and to follow, and to catch human souls on our own. And we come to church to learn from Jesus - from any method and medium He chooses to use to get our attention - how to live life in all its fullness, which is God's desire for us... and for all the world.

In this gospel story, we heard the prophet Isaiah foretelling - seeing and imagining God's future - the coming of Christ, and Isaiah described not just the land of Zebulun and Naphtali: he describes the human condition. "The people sitting out their lives in the dark saw a huge light; sitting in that dark, dark, country of death, they watched the sun come up." The scripture tells us that Isaiah's words came to life when Jesus appeared and proclaimed, "Change your life. God's kingdom is here." Jesus called the first disciples who followed Him to help reveal the kingdom of God. The interesting thing to see is that Jesus didn't say, "God's kingdom is coming soon. Get ready! Just 2,000 more years!" He said... "God's kingdom is here." And then He called men and women to follow Him, to learn from Him, to see what God's kingdom looks like. And at the end of this story we get a glimpse of God's kingdom: "Jesus healed people of their diseases and of the bad effects of their bad lives. People brought anyone with an

ailment, whether mental, emotional, or physical. Jesus healed them, one and all.” This glimpse of God’s kingdom is God’s vision for all people: welcome, healing, and a new beginning. This is life in all its fullness. This is why we are called to be fishers of the human soul: to welcome, to heal, to offer a new beginning, to anyone and everyone who is “sitting out their lives in the dark, sitting in that dark, dark country of death.”

When Jesus catches us in His net He begins God’s slow work in us of transforming us into who we were created to be. We were created to love God with every fiber of our being, and to love others the way we, at the deepest core of our being, long to be loved. As God’s slow work of transforming us begins, our priorities change and we are less self-focused and more others-focused. We become willing to be fishers of the human soul, offering Jesus’ inclusive and persistent love to others. We move from being spectators of God’s kingdom to participants in God’s kingdom... and we begin to truly follow Jesus.

The gospel stories are condensed accounts, snatches of stories, of Jesus. In this story of Jesus calling the first disciples we don’t see the pain of their transformation. We don’t hear of them having to choose between their own preferences and prejudices and self-will, of them being shaped and molded into the image of Christ, of them learning to become fishers of the human soul. The work of God in us is slow work. The 19<sup>th</sup> century author and philosopher (and I don’t know, he might have also been a humorist) GK Chesterton said, “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried.” The work of God in us is slow work, and it’s painful because God is shaping and molding and training us, giving us new ideas, new visions, and new priorities. Jesus gathers us together - He brings us here - so we can experience radical

and inclusive welcome; where we can be healed of loneliness and despair and self-centeredness; where we can see the love lighting the darkness... where we see glimpses of God's kingdom... where we have a new vision of "life in all its fullness"... and where we hear Jesus' invitation, again and again, to be participants, not spectators, in the revealing of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

What part of "life in all its fullness" is calling to you? What do you need from Jesus? Don't be afraid to ask Him. We are, like the first disciples walking away from our old lives into new lives, following the Master, Jesus, because He has promised to teach us how to experience for ourselves, and to offer to others, abundant life.

Our Prayer Song is on page 4 of the bulletin, and as we remain seated, let's sing this as a call-and-response between us and Jesus.

**Will you come and follow Me if I but call your name? will you go where you don't know and never be the same? Will you let My love be shown, will you let My name be known, will you let My life be grown in you and you in Me?**

**Will you love the "you" you hide if I but call you name? Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same? Will you use the faith you've found to reshape the world around, through My sight and touch and sound in you and you in me?**

**Lord, Your summons echoes true when You but call my name. Let me turn and follow You and never be the same. In Your company I'll go where Your love and footsteps show. Thus I'll move and live and grow in You and You in me.**

Amen.

