

The Call and the Response

Matthew 4:12-23

Sermon by: Rev. Benjamin Broadbent
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For: First Congregational Church (UCC) of Colorado Springs

I.

This is a unique setting in which to hear God's Word. We gather as the First Congregational Church, but today we are blessed by the presence of a significant number of newcomers and visitors to our community. We gather as the church occupying and caring for the oldest sanctuary building in the city, but this is not that sanctuary. This is a very different, and yet equally beautiful space, and we are grateful to the college for opening its doors to us as it does to so many in this city. We gather to experience gospel music, music that is familiar, even beloved, to most of us here, but which is not the usual music with which many of us who are gathered here worship.

It is good to be different, to be uniting as a different sort of people, to be gathering in this different kind of space, and to be worshiping in this different kind of mode. And I say it's good to be different because I believe that, even when we find ourselves in a different kind of situation, God remains the same. Do you believe this? Do you believe that our God is the same God on the prairie as on the top of Pikes Peak? Do you believe that our God is the same God in Shove Chapel as at First Congregational as at Emmanuel Baptist as at New Life Church as at St. Mary's Cathedral. Do you believe that our God is the same God in the choir loft as in the pews as in the soup kitchen in the room beneath our feet. Do you believe this? It's good to be different, for our God remains the same.

The text to which I would like us to train our attention this morning comes from Matthew's Gospel, the fourth chapter, beginning with the 12th verse and concluding with the 23rd:

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

*"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."*

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea - for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Would you pray with me? God, bless this hearing of the gospel also to our understanding of the gospel and to our doing of the gospel. In these words that I share, if there is a Word that you would have us hear, let us hear that Word. Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening. Amen.

II.

Zebulun and Naphtali. When we hear place names like this, names that are unfamiliar we are prone to ignore them. At best, when we hear “Zebulun,” we might think about Mr. Pike after whom our neighborhood mountain is named.

To the contemporaries of Jesus, and to the early church, responding to Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection, these place names - Zebulun and Naphtali - evoked harsh associations in the same way that Nam, Mogadishu, and Abu Ghraib have for people in today’s American context. Matthew draws these names - Zebulun and Naphtali - out of the 9th chapter of Isaiah. It is a chapter in which the prophet speaks about a time of great conflict, the 8th century BCE to be specific. It was a time when Assyria was struggling to maintain its power in the region. During that time, the people of Zebulun and Naphtali in Galilee had known the terror of war. They had known the terror of hunger. They had known the terror of disease. They had known the terror of death. And they had known what it meant to be under the foot of a greater power, an empire which used violence to control the lives of its subjects.

Now, in chapter 4 of his gospel, Matthew tells us that Jesus withdrew to Galilee. Specifically, Jesus moves from the town of Nazareth to the town of Capernaum. Capernaum is by the Sea of Galilee, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. Matthew tells us what prompts Jesus’ move - the arrest of John the Baptist - an act of violence against Jesus’ cousin, his elder, the leader of a movement of repentance of which Jesus has been a part. John is arrested and Jesus goes to Galilee. To escape danger? Perhaps, for now. But Matthew is convinced that Jesus’ move to Galilee is to fulfill a prophecy. That is, Jesus chooses to launch his public ministry by moving into a territory associated with violence and suffering. Jesus launches his public ministry as an act of resistance to the perpetrators of violence. The opening salvo of Jesus’ ministry is to bring light to a land of darkness.

III.

Upon arrival in Galilee, Jesus takes up the message of John the Baptist: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” From that time on, Matthew says, the need to repent and the nearness of the kingdom become Jesus’ message.

- From that time on, Jesus proclaims: “It’s time to make a change.”
- From that time on, Jesus proclaims: “The time is now.”
- From that time on, Jesus proclaims: “The kingdom is near.”
- From that time on, Jesus proclaims: “God’s light is now shining on you.”
- From that time on, Jesus proclaims: “Even now, God’s kingdom of peace is breaking into the world. The party has already been planned. It’s time to RSVP.” And so he begins to invite the local folk.

Matthew’s account of Jesus calling his first disciples is so stark, it is jarring. It lacks details for which we, the hearers of his story, desperately long. Matthew’s narrative sparks more questions than answers. Did Jesus just invite the first people he came across? What was it about Jesus that made Simon and Andrew leave their nets “immediately”? What did Zebedee do when his sons, James and John, put down their sewing needles, got out of their boat, and walked away without a word? Did he yell at them? Did he cry? What did these two sets of brothers think they were getting themselves into? Did they know *that* day that *this* man would change their lives forever?

And what did they make of Jesus' words: "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people"? Finally, and in my estimation, this is the most difficult question that the narrative sparks:

"Is this *really* what is required in order to follow Jesus?"

Really? To leave the life I know?

Really? To do it now? Immediately?

Really? To do it completely, without looking back? Without even saying to dear old dad, "Don't worry, daddy, I'll write. Save me a place in the boat. Maybe this won't last very long. Who knows, I might be home for dinner. Don't rent out my room just yet."

Really? Is this *really* what is required in order to follow Jesus? Is it *really* an all or nothing kind of deal?

What if the answer to that question is yes? If the answer is yes, then friends, what would be *your* equivalent of leaving your nets? If the answer is yes, what would be your equivalent of leaving the boat and your father? If the answer is yes, what would you hope to gain by leaving your nets at the shore? What would you hope to be a part of by taking off your boat shoes and putting on your walking shoes? And what is it about the way he said "follow me" that makes you want to follow?

I'll tell you, if the answer to the question, "Is this really what is required to follow Jesus," is *yes*, then most of us are in big trouble. We're in trouble because most of us, whether we call ourselves conservative or liberal, most of us, whether we're registered as Democrat or Republican, most of us, whether we consider ourselves Christian or something else, most of us, whether we attend church sometimes or all the time or none of the time, most of us, whether we *think* we're following Jesus, most of us, that is, 99.99% of us, have *not* left everything to follow him.

The questions then, it seems to me, become: Do I lack faith? Am I lost? Shall I just give up trying? If it's all or nothing and I haven't given my all, am I left with nothing?

IV.

I prayed about these questions this week. And I had to pray hard about it. Do you know why? Because ministers are faced with a very particular kind of temptation. I call it the "Holier Than Thou" temptation. You see, people think that we ministers have given up our whole lives to serve God, and we ministers are tempted to believe that that is true. We are tempted to believe that we, among all others, have given up everything to follow Jesus. We are tempted to think we are "Holier Than Thou."

Holier than thou because I go to church every week, even though my paycheck depends upon it. Holier than thou because I pray every day, even though I just might skip it if other people didn't say, "Pastor, could you open our meeting with a prayer."

Holier than thou because I study the scriptures on a regular basis, even though I'd better study scripture if I want know something about it, and as long as I know just a little more about it than you, we can keep things in their proper order, can't we? At least we can keep up the charade a little longer that I am Holier Than Thou, and if I am Holier Than Thou, then at least that's one person I've got a leg up on.

But Jesus doesn't have much patience with Holier Than Thou attitudes, minister or not. We are, to Jesus, all in the same boat, all on the same road, and all equal before God. Equal before God, Jesus comes to us, to each of us, in the midst of the lives each of us are living. Just as he came to the fishermen while they were living the life *they* knew, so does he come to each of us in our own particular contexts living the life we know. Upon seeing the fishermen doing what fishermen do, casting nets into the sea and mending the nets upon the shore, He does *not* ask them to do something completely out of their range of experience. He does *not* ask them to do something they

don't know how to do. He does *not* ask them to be other than fishermen. What he does is to change the frame and the scope of their vocation. "Follow me, fishermen, and I will make you fishers of people."

Seen in this light, Jesus' call could apply to any of us:

- Follow me, teachers, and I will make you teachers of people, the means of opening minds to new possibilities.
- Follow me, construction workers, and I will make you builders of a glorious future.
- Follow me, full-time parents, and I will make you parents of a peaceful society.
- Follow me, soldiers, and I will make you warriors of disarmament.
- Follow me, choir directors, and I will make you a director of my spirit moving in creation's choir.
- Follow me, high school and college students, and I will make you students of life beyond degree and position, students of meaning and purpose.
- Follow me, scientists, and I will make you scientists of a just and sustainable living.
- Follow me, therapists, and I will make you therapists of the soul, healing deep wounds.
- And, follow me, ministers, yes, even ministers.
- Follow me and I will cure you of "Holier Than Thou." Walk with me into the land of former violence, into places like Zebulun and Naphtali, meet people where they are, and enlist them into the work of God's kingdom, breaking in from heaven even now, breaking in upon a people sitting in darkness, breaking in and shining a great light upon them.

V.

There is a call which requires a response. The call comes to us in the midst of the lives we are actually living. The response required comes from that same place, from the life you are actually living. Now the questions become: Given that I have been called to walk with Jesus in the land of darkness and violence, how then shall I live? What net, heavy with routine, shall I leave behind today, And what boat, rocking with preconceptions, shall I abandon today?

The call and the response are not difficult to understand. The call from Jesus is "Follow me." The response from you is to do it, to do it immediately, to do it today.

The call and the response are not difficult to understand. You've been called by Jesus to follow. Your response is to do it, starting now.

It's gonna take your lifetime, however much or little time you have left. There's no time to lose, no good reason to wait. You've been called to follow. Do it.

Amen.