

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
January 22, 2023 – 3 Epiphany
Isaiah 9:1-4; Matthew 4:12-23 – Jesus Calls the Fishermen
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We have just heard Matthew's account of the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Key points about his ministry are conveyed in this very short passage. First, there is Jesus' relationship to John the Baptist. We know that John was an important figure – the prophet who preached repentance, prepared the way of the Lord, and identified Jesus as the Messiah. In this morning's reading we learn that it was when John was arrested that Jesus went into action. Then he began to preach, the same message that John had preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." As we know, the kingdom of heaven has come near in Jesus himself. As his story unfolds, we will learn much more about this kingdom. At this point, Matthew emphasizes that repentance – a basic reorientation of life – is our proper response to the coming of the kingdom of heaven. We hear in this passage that Jesus also began the two other primary works of his ministry: teaching and healing.

The place where Jesus began his ministry is important. Matthew tells us that Jesus "left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum" in Galilee. This is a town on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, near the mouth of the Jordan River. Matthew connects Jesus' move to Capernaum to the words of the prophet Isaiah, which we heard in our Old Testament reading this morning: "in the latter time he [the promised king] will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations." In Matthew's view Jesus was the promised king. As we study Matthew's Gospel this year, we will often see how he connects the life and ministry of Jesus to the words of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible. From Matthew's perspective, Jesus is the fulfillment of God's plan, a plan that had been spoken of for centuries before his birth.

Located by the Sea of Galilee and ready to begin his ministry, Jesus calls his first disciples, two pairs of brothers – Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John, sons of Zebedee – all fishermen. The men were busy working. Jesus approached them and said, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." And immediately each of them left their work and livelihood, their families, and their homes to follow Jesus. To follow in his footsteps; in Peter's case, to follow all the way to his own crucifixion.

These men left their means of livelihood, and the sons of Zebedee left their father to follow Jesus. That was the beginning of their journeys. They still had to learn every day how to follow Jesus, how to understand his message, how to model their behavior after his. We know from the record of scripture that they made some very significant mistakes on the way. When Jesus was explaining that he would have to suffer and be rejected and killed, Peter rebuked him. Then Jesus said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!" (Mark 8:31-33). James and John asked Jesus if they could sit at his right hand and his left hand in his glory. Jesus then taught all the disciples – certainly not for the first or last time – saying, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all" (Mark 42-44). There are many times in the gospels when we can hear Jesus' frustration and sadness because his disciples have failed to truly comprehend his witness to the kingdom of God.

We are gathered here as people who have heard the call of Jesus to follow him. Perhaps in one outstanding moment, like the fishermen in today's gospel lesson. Perhaps

slowly over time, either steadily or in fits and starts. We have heard our Lord, and we have said, “yes, I will follow you.” Just like Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John, we have probably made significant mistakes along the way. Certainly, each of us has room for ongoing growth in discipleship.

Spiritual growth – soul growth – is about what kind of people we are becoming, day by day, decision by decision. For Christians our goal is to become more like Christ, more like creatures of God made in the image of God, showing in our lives our God-given capacity to love God and to live in harmony with one another and with all of creation. As I have said many times before, Jesus’ teachings and what he did in his years of ministry may be our surest guides as we grow.

In my sermon three weeks ago, on New Year’s Day, I quoted an early 20th century Methodist Bishop who made a daily resolve that was, in essence, a decision to be a perfect Christian in thought, word, and deed every single day. I don’t know how that worked for him, but nothing like that has ever worked for me.

We must begin where we are to take the next step in soul growth. To do that we need to honestly admit to ourselves where we need to grow, where we are challenged today, and then take whatever next small step toward God that is needed. For example, perhaps someone has hurt you personally with what appears to you to be bad intention. You regard that person as your enemy. You feel anger and hatred toward the person. Then you remember that Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43-44).

How do you get there? It’s unlikely that one great effort of will is going to do it. Perhaps you need to tell God exactly how you feel. I’m angry. I hate that person for hurting me. I don’t want to pray for him or her! Be honest. Look at some of the psalms if you need support for this kind of prayer. Then let God work in your soul. Open the door to the possibility that the Holy Spirit can accomplish in you what you cannot accomplish yourself. And leave your prayer with as much honest intention as you can to give up any act of revenge by word or deed. Pray this way day after day, as long as the soul growth takes.

Wise spiritual guides throughout the ages teach us that as our characters develop, our habits of behavior become easier and easier. The more we practice love, the easier it is to be loving. The more we practice generosity and compassion, the easier it becomes to be generous and compassionate. The more we attend to God and our neighbors, the easier that becomes. And the more we will experience peace and joy.

Of course, all this works in the opposite direction as well. Hating others can become as much a habit as loving others. Being selfish can become a more and more settled orientation of our lives. One lie leads to the next. Speaking contemptuously of others once makes it easier the second time. You know what I mean.

Jesus called those four fishermen to follow him two thousand years ago. Jesus is still calling disciples, still calling us to follow him. How is Jesus calling you to follow him in your life now, in the day-to-day details of your thoughts and your actions? How is Jesus calling this parish to follow him? The Holy Spirit can guide us in our discipleship. God has promised to help us. We can help one another to follow Jesus when he calls. May we listen with the ears of our hearts and follow the Lord we love, today and always. In Jesus’ name. Amen.