

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
January 25, 2026 – 3 Epiphany  
Isaiah 9:1-4; Matthew 4:12-23 – Jesus Calls the Fishermen  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

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 the account of Jesus' ministry 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.

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. 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 and that they often failed to truly comprehend Jesus' 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 those first disciples, we have probably made significant mistakes along the way. Certainly, each of us has room for ongoing growth in discipleship.

Last week I spoke about our baptismal vows, specifically our promise to "strive for justice and peace and respect the dignity of every human being." The dignity of every human being comes from the fact that we are all made in the image of God. This means – among other things – that we all have the capacity to love God and to live in harmony with creation, with other human beings, and with God. We all have the capacity to be in an active, living, dynamic relationship with God. As followers of Jesus, we believe that our goal is to become more like Christ. We believe that our lives should be a witness to our true nature – creatures made in the image of God, our Creator. God wants this for us because to love God and to live in harmony with creation and with other people will bring us "*shalom*" – wholeness, peace, well-being, joy.

As we strive for justice, we do so in the context of a world where injustice is rampant. I believe it is morally right to name injustice for what it is, to identify human wrongdoing, and to do all we can to oppose what is wrong and evil. I believe that we find our moral "true north" most reliably in the ministry and teaching of Jesus, who preached the overarching messages of the Hebrew prophets before him.

To name and fight against what is wrong may tempt us to judge the dignity and worth of the human beings who are doing what is wrong. Haven't we all felt this, either personally or on a larger scale?

We believe that judgment rightly belongs to God alone. So, how can we leave the judgment to God? How can we judge what is morally right and wrong and at the same time respect the dignity of every human being? How can we retain our belief that every human being has the capacity to love God and to live in harmony with creation, with other human beings, and with God? In my experience, this can be terribly difficult.

There is a verse in John's Gospel (3:19) that helps us here. "This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil." This is the judgment, not this will be the judgment.

You probably know the author C.S. Lewis from his children's books – the Narnia series. He also wrote fiction for adults, including a fantasy with a moral called "The Great Divorce." The title needs some explanation. The poet, William Blake, wrote "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" in which he argued that heaven and hell, good and evil are not in conflict with each other. Lewis contends that the two cannot rightly be married but are distinctly and eternally at odds – divorced. The book illustrates Lewis' point. A warning – this was published in 1945, and some of the ideas – for example, about women – are of that time and likely to be offensive to us now.

Lewis represents Hell as a "Grey Town" where people are isolated from one another and joyless. They have chosen "self" and they are stuck with "self." However, every inhabitant of the Grey Town has the opportunity to take a bus trip from Hell to Heaven and is free to choose to remain in Heaven and never return to Hell. The requirement for staying in Heaven is to choose God's will rather than self-will. In this fantasy, most of the people taking the bus to Heaven choose to return to Hell, regardless of Heaven's beauty. It is simply too difficult for them to repent. An interesting feature of Hell is that the more consistently a person chooses his or her own grievances or selfish desires, the further from the bus stop and Heaven they live. The opportunity to get on the bus and go to Heaven and stay in Heaven is still theirs, but the journey to the bus stop gets longer and more difficult with each selfish choice.

The moral point of the book is that human beings have the God-given freedom to choose between self and God, and there are consequences of the choices people make. God does not punish people by "sending them to Hell." To be trapped into oneself, to reject God is hell. Every human being must either accept God's will on God's terms or insist on their own will. The idea is the same in the quotation I read from John's Gospel. The light – Christ – has come into the world and we have a choice to make – to live either in the light or in the darkness.

Wise spiritual guides throughout the ages teach us that as we make choice after choice in life, our habitual choices 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 and hurting others can become as much a habit as loving and helping 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, and so on.

With each moral choice we move either nearer to God or further away from God. We can always repent and return to God. We believe that God welcomes those who repent. We retain the freedom that God has given us, the freedom which is part of our creation in the image of God. But when we choose ourselves rather than God repeatedly, returning to God becomes spiritually more and more unlikely. And that is the judgment.

I don't know about you, but I don't want to be any further away from the bus stop to Heaven than I already am. And so I pray that with God's help we – followers of Jesus who are the church in this place at this time – will help one another continue to make choice after choice for God and the kingdom of God Jesus brought near. Amen.