

The Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 22, 2017
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Isaiah 9:1-4
Psalm 27:1, 5-13
1 Corinthians 1:10-18
Matthew 4:12-23

Every year, about this time of the year, we hear one of the accounts of the call of the disciples. Jesus begins his public ministry by calling followers to drop everything and follow him, never telling them at the outset where he's going.

And, amazingly, astonishingly, perhaps unbelievably, that's what they do. He calls Simon Peter and Andrew, even as they're out in a boat casting their nets, and ...

Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

He goes on from there and sees two others, James and John, sitting in a boat and mending nets with their father. He calls on them to follow and ...

Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

It's all pretty stupendous, pretty dramatic.

But maybe it all sounds to you – as it often does to me – too dramatic, too stupendous, too sudden to be believable and to be believed. These guys, we may think, must have been extraordinarily bold and daring, not ordinary folk like you and me. And if that's how we hear the story of their call and if that's how we think of them, we'll inevitably come to the conclusion that because they are so unlike us, their story has nothing to do with us.

But maybe it didn't all unfold as we've always imagined it. So let's hear again how Matthew talks about the day of their calling. After Jesus' baptism ...

When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left [his childhood home of] Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea.

"Capernaum by the sea" ... it might sound like some idyllic vacation spot. But it wasn't idyllic. And it wasn't a vacation spot. To the contrary, Capernaum was a first-century backwater town of maybe a thousand people or so, populated mostly by fishermen and farmers. It wasn't the center of power or commerce or influence; it wasn't the center of ... well, of anything.

So when a rabbi moved to this seemingly God-forsaken, podunk village – even if this particular rabbi, Jesus, moved there maybe just to lay low for a bit after John's arrest – well, the locals would notice. As Matthew tells it, I rather imagine that their lives overlapped and intersected for a time. These four might have gone out to hear him teach or preach. They may have talked with him. They almost certainly would have talked *about* him. So on that fateful day when Jesus walked by and said, "Follow me ..." maybe they were already primed.

And Matthew doesn't say that they dropped everything and never looked back. Yes, we're told that they left their nets that day – that they left their father and they left their nets and they left their boats that day – but we're not told what happens the next day. Peter still has a house there. Peter still has a mother-in-law. We know that, because Matthew will go on to tell us about the time, quite some time later, when Jesus would go to Peter's house in Capernaum – same Peter, same Capernaum – and heal Peter's mother-in-law there (Matthew 8:14-15). It looks like they came back to their nets at least every now and again.

All of which is to say that maybe their response isn't so incomprehensible.

And yet it's all so very extraordinary, all the same. This morning we hear that this all takes place in a backwater town in the land of Zebulun, in the land of Naphtali. Isaiah spoke of the same land in our first reading this morning. The Assyrians had conquered the people who lived there 700 years before ... and in these later days, the Romans occupy the land and control the sea and dictate terms to the people who lived there and tried to make a living and a life there. The place names mean nothing to us. They meant practically nothing to Jesus' contemporaries, if it comes to it. That's rather the point. The powers of the world had crushed them entirely.

I'm reminded of the sermon Jeff Bullock offered us here last Sunday. He spoke of other verses from the prophet Isaiah that declared that God would work through a people thoroughly defeated, weak and isolated, to make them God's instrument of hope for the whole world. A conquered minority in the backwater of culture and history would shine with God's glory.

Jesus' coming to four fishermen and calling them to join him is a bit like that. It takes a fair amount of chutzpah, if I can put it that way, for Simon and Andrew and James and John to take him seriously. They live in the land of Zebulun, the land of Naphtali, after all. They live in a land of deep darkness until Jesus comes to them, as a light shining into their darkness, telling them "the kingdom of heaven has come near."

It's a hard phrase to translate. We translate it as "kingdom," but the translation doesn't do it justice. Kingdoms are anachronistic to our modern age, suggestive of royalty and castles. We think of a place we visit, but it's not so much a place as an alternative world order. It doesn't refer to where we go after we die so much as how we're ruled while we live.

We could translate it as "empire" or "system" or "reign" or "regime" ... or, in modern terms, perhaps even "administration." Jesus calls on them to align themselves with God's way of ordering the world for the good of all, rather than accommodating themselves to the powers that be.

Jesus invited them to imagine a better way for people to live together. They were fishermen. Their fathers were fishermen before them. Their sons would be fishermen after them. Their daughters would marry fishermen. It was back-breaking work, with little to show for it and little hope for anything to change. As one commentator puts it:

Peter and Andrew and [James and] John weren't fishing for sport—they were fishing to survive. They were merely cogs in the economy of the Roman Empire. In fact, fishermen were so heavily taxed for the right to fish the sea of Galilee that their backbreaking labor netted them just enough to survive, but little else.

You can begin to see why Jesus was put to death by the Roman authorities as a political revolutionary: the first act of his ministry was to ... liberate some of the cogs in the Emperor's great machine.ⁱ

Jesus tells them that they'll "fish for people." I think it's a way of saying that he isn't calling on them to stop being who they are. He's calling on them to start where they are and begin to live and love and serve some bigger purpose. He's inviting them to imagine they have something more important to do than merely toil away their days.

That's no small offer, so they took Jesus up on it. They followed. He showed them a way to go, he showed them a new way to live, and, over time, they learned. So that, in the end, they, too, might become lights shining for other "people who sat in darkness" – fishers of people, cultivators of new life, shepherds of God's flock.

Theirs is an extraordinary story, an extraordinary call. And the most extraordinary about it is that it's our story too. We prayed this morning for the grace to answer readily the call of Jesus in our own time. Jesus still comes to backwaters and invites simple folk like you and me to come, to follow, to be lights in midst of the darkness of our own times.

We shouldn't be too surprised. It doesn't come to us out of the blue. We've heard the stories. We've met the one who, as the old hymn puts it, "calls us o'er the tumult." And yet it's still extraordinary to think that we have an important part to play in God's work in this world.

If it seems like too much, let's go back and hear the story of those first called. They'll show us where to begin. Like them, we're invited to follow along after Jesus, paying attention once again to notice where he goes, who he sees, and what he does. That's what we do every week as we hear once more the gospel. And like them, we're invited, also, to follow Jesus by following his example of living as if God's plan for us and for our world is a thing near at hand. That's what we do every day as we live out our calling as children of God, lights in our generation.

ⁱ Jason Cox @ <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2016/12/18/think-again-epiphany-3a/>.