

Third Sunday after the Epiphany
January 26, 2020
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Isaiah 9:1-4
Psalm 27:1, 5-13
1 Corinthians 1:10-18
Matthew 4:12-23



"Well, thank you, I'd love to. Are the Himalayas far?"

Over many years, this *New Yorker* cartoon has become something of a running joke between my wife, Barb, and me. Especially since 2014, when I asked if she'd like to walk the Camino with me – 500 miles across northern Spain. "I'd love to. Are the Himalayas far?"

I think of this cartoon just about every time we hear this morning's gospel – or any of the other gospel accounts of Jesus calling his disciples.

If there were a cartoon version of the story, Jesus would be the experienced mountaineer. Simon and Andrew and James and John would be the naïve innocents sitting on a barstool.

As Matthew tells it, Jesus knows the dangers ahead, right from the start. Jesus hears that John the Baptist has been arrested, so he flees for safety to the relatively obscure Galilean town of Capernaum. It's not unlike what Mary and Joseph did before, just after the birth of Jesus. They fled another king named Herod – first to Egypt and when they returned, they settled not in Bethlehem but in Galilee, hoping to keep their child safe there. They fled imperial violence then. Jesus flees it now. So don't miss the point: Jesus knows the dangers of the road he's taken.

And yet Jesus embarks on a dangerous adventure all the same. He knows the import of what he will proclaim, words that deliberately echo John:

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

And the very next thing Jesus does is begin calling disciples: Simon and his brother Andrew, James and John, sons of Zebedee. We don't know why he calls disciples at this moment. Maybe he wanted company. Maybe he knew it was smart to take companions along when you're putting yourself at risk: don't walk alone in the wilderness; don't swim alone in the ocean.

But I'm actually more muddled about the disciples. Jesus calls. He calls. And they get up. And they leave everything and everyone they've ever known. And they follow him. And they do it all, Matthew tells us, IMMEDIATELY.

They got up that morning, presumably another morning much like any other. They got up early, while it was still dark, and walk down to the seaside to hurl nets into the water, hoping for a catch of fish. A day like so many others. Nothing special. They've done the same thing, day in and day out, hundreds of times before. It's what they do. It's who they are.

It would have been hard work all the same. And little to show for it. The fishing industry in imperial Rome was heavily regulated and taxed. If you caught nothing, you ended up with nothing. If you had a good catch, you paid fees for the privilege and taxes on the catch. They weren't fishing for themselves, they were fishing for Rome. So maybe that's why they took Jesus up on his offer.

And yet, whatever their reasons for responding, they were hardly prepared for the journey. Everything that happens thereafter tells us that much. Start with Simon: he boldly professes his faith in Jesus, then refuses to listen; at the Last Supper, he promises he'll never abandon Jesus, then denies him later that same night. James and John are no better; they come off as power-hungry, asking Jesus for seats at his right and his left in his kingdom, expecting to reap the rewards of following him.

And they could hardly have imagined where the journey would take them: not the highs, nor the lows; not all that would be given them, nor all that would be asked of them.

We get a hint this morning of the first surprising highs in that last paragraph. They follow Jesus who then goes on to teach in synagogues in that region, to proclaim good news as he cures disease and sickness. We don't hear the next couple of verses, but we should; they go on with more of the same – only more so:

... his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

It must have seemed like a wild ride beyond their expectations at times, right from the start.

Of course, we know something of the unexpected lows as well. They follow Jesus, and so they are witnesses as he is attacked and criticized. They follow Jesus – against their will, it seems – as he makes his way to Jerusalem and to betrayal and to the cross.

And so I return to that *New Yorker* cartoon and the punchline:

Well, thank you, I'd love to. Are the Himalayas far?

They didn't have a clue just how far they would go. They follow all the same.

And I wonder if that has something to do with the first thing we hear Jesus say this morning. Before Jesus called them specifically, he had called out for everyone to "repent." As you've heard here (more than once) before, repentance isn't primarily – maybe even not hardly – about morality. It's not merely a call to set aside sin and turn to right living. It's about a "new mind," adopting a "change in your way of thinking," an invitation to "wrap your mind around this."

Jesus is telling everyone that the kingdom of heaven is coming near. I take it to mean that he's offering a new vision for how we live in this world.

And when he joins that call to repent, that call to adopt a new vision for the world, with a call to these fisherfolk to follow, I think he means to tell them that anyone and everyone can take part. Even ordinary fisherfolk on an ordinary day are called. What ordinary people do on any given day matters in the grand scheme of things. "Wrap your mind around that!" And join him in this grand adventure.

No, they don't know how far the Himalayas are – or how they'll get there. But they do know that Jesus sees something in them, something of value and worth. They have no idea where they will go or what they will do. But they do know that Jesus is call them to be his companions, and they trust that the rest will become clear to them along the way.

And maybe that's why any of this matters to you and me. For we, too, are still reminded of our value, our worth. We're called to follow the way (and the ways) of Jesus. It takes a leap of faith to think what we do in response to that calling matters, but the good news is that we matter ... AND that what we do in this world – today and every day – matters too.

That *New Yorker* cartoon, as I've told you, has become a running joke in my house. I got down on one knee a little over forty years ago and proposed, and Barb said, "Yes ... Are the Himalayas far?" I came home one day and told her I thought I might want to go to seminary, and she said, "Yes ... Are the Himalayas far?" One of us told the other we wanted to start a family back in 1984 (rather than wait until we were ready), and the other said, "Yes ... Are the Himalayas far?"

We've made decisions all through our lives – and my guess is you have too – that we made before knowing how far they would take us. And the best explanation I can offer for ourselves – and for Simon and Andrew and for James and John – is that these journeys are worth taking without knowing the journey's end. For we are all called to be adventurers.

I'll leave you off with a prayer by Thomas Merton that seems apt for the occasion:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

We are called to destinations we cannot see. We walk by faith, not knowing the perils before us. Nor the joys. But we venture forth, trusting that the one who calls us as friends to follow will be our companion along every step of every way.