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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, January 26, 2020
3rd Sunday after Epiphany/Lectionary 3/Proper X/Year A

First Reading: Isaiah 9:1-4

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Gospel Reading: Matthew 4:12-23

Sermon Title: “Proclaiming the Good News”

Theme

Jesus begins his public ministry shortly after John the Baptist is imprisoned by Herod. He proclaims the nearness of God’s reign and calls four fishermen to be his first disciples.

Text

¹²Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

¹⁵“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—

¹⁶the 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.”

¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

¹⁸As 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. ¹⁹And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” ²⁰Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹As 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. ²²Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

²³Jesus 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.

Sermon

I have always wondered this and I wonder if the thought has ever crossed your mind. The way the Gospels are written, Jesus' selection of the Twelve, seems completely random. He saw a person, or as is the case in Matthew's Gospel, two sets of two people, and he just spoke to them and invited them to follow him, whatever that could have meant, and "immediately" wrote Matthew, they dropped whatever they were doing and followed him. Imagine the power, the influence, the charisma of an encounter with Jesus, this unknown passer-by.

Let me remind you that we are in chapter four of Matthew's Gospel and by this time the only thing that has happened is that Jesus was baptized and driven into the wilderness where he was tempted for 40 days – a story that no one knows yet. So, Jesus was walking along the Sea of Galilee and saw these four fisherman, the brothers, Peter and Andrew, and another set of brothers, James and John.

These are not boys out having a Huck Finn fishing experience. On the contrary, they are men trying to make a living from fishing. As I understand it, the Sea of Galilee then and now is plentiful with fish and still provides a decent livelihood for fisherman and fish for the local economy. But more to the point, these were working men, presumably providing a living for themselves and perhaps for their families.

Matthew even included mention that James and John were there with their Father Zebedee, mending their nets, an almost daily routine for the fisherman in this time and place. Imagine being Zebedee and watching this stranger Jesus say just a few words to your sons and workmates in the family business and then they drop what they are doing and wander off. We don't hear about Zebedee again, though his wife and mother of James and John, a woman by the name of Salome, also became a disciple of Jesus and was recorded among the women at the foot of the cross. What did she see and hear when she encountered Jesus?

But back to Jesus, were his choices of disciples random or Spirit-led? What do you think? Does it matter?

Think about this: If Jesus was led by the Spirit to these men, then there was probably some reason for the Spirit's leading. Maybe the Spirit saw a hard-work

ethic in the fishermen. Maybe the *good days/bad days* life of a fisherman had proven them to be both tenacious and patient, attitudes that might be useful in the bringing and establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven. Let's face it, if it were not for them, we probably wouldn't be here.

But on the other hand, if Jesus' selection of these four men was completely random then I think it affirms what I said earlier when I wondered out loud what power, influence, and charisma Jesus must have had to cause this radical kind of reaction – to just drop everything and follow him – and to do what? And go where? And why?

I don't have an answer for you, as I said, I am just wondering out loud. There is room in this one-sided conversation for both answers – led by the Spirit, or randomly offered a job.

In this priestly role I fill, my colleagues and I talk a lot about call, and I certainly have sensed it. But I sincerely think you must feel it too! Don't you? Don't you feel called to ministry in Jesus' name? Maybe you don't express it that way, but you are here. Most of you week after week, doing the things that we do here at Zion. You've answered a call to be Christian and to live out your lives of discipleship here at Zion. I believe that. I believe that that is what is happening right now.

But I also wonder if it mattered who Jesus called to follow him. Work with me for a moment. It is pretty clear that not everyone was pulled in by his spiritual tether. He had numerous enemies who hated him enough to kill him. But what if there are two types of conditions that human hearts have; those amenable to spiritual things and those who are not.

You know both types. Some, you for example, believe to varying degrees. I suspect, I hope, that if we had an encounter with Jesus Christ, and looked into his eyes and heard his voice that that would be it. He could ask us to drop what we are doing like the four fisherman and we would. Do I speak for you?

And then there are others whom I guess, just go through this amazing life and believe that it is all just haphazard. There is no god, no prime-mover, nothing to have faith in, and when they die, they presume, the gig is up. This is the darkness that Isaiah wrote about in the First Reading.

As an aside, my family and I were talking about bucket-list items the other night and I mentioned that just about the only thing on my list is to visit the Holy Lands and if you want to know why, it is because:

- I want to be in the town where he was born,
- I want to walk the same dusty paths that he walked,
- I want to stand on mount where he preached his sermons,
- I want to ride in a boat on the same water of the Sea of Galilee that he did,
- and I want to walk the same stone streets that he did when he went to the cross.

Acknowledging that likely none of the tourist spots are authentic, matters little to me. I just want to get closer to my Lord Jesus, even if it is to be where he was 2000 years ago.

When I draw my last earthly breath, I want to open my resurrected eyes and see only his. As I ponder what that might be like, I am embarrassed to think that I wasted so much of my earthly life not doing more for him, knowing intellectually that his eyes only contain love, and grace, and mercy. Honestly, that's what I think will happen.

Andrew and Peter, James and John heard his voice call to them, and looked into his eyes and that was it for them. They dropped what they were doing and followed him. To do what? And go where? And why? I don't think it mattered.

Unless he returns while we are still alive, we will have to wait to the other side to hear his voice and look into his eyes. Until then there is work to be done.

You and I believe that this old, old story is true. You and I believe that it is Good News for us and for every created being. And when we let our often cold exteriors melt away by thoughts of hearing his voice and looking into his eyes, we have a great story of faith to tell.

We do stuff that the rest of the unbelieving world think is crazy. I'll talk more about the *Gospel of Fun* tomorrow at the Annual Congregation Meeting.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

This week as you do your daily devotions, I would encourage you to read this text a couple more times and meditate on what you think Andrew and Peter, James and John heard and saw in Jesus and what went through their hearts and minds that caused them to drop everything and make such a radical change in their lives. They heard something and saw something in him that changed their lives for eternity. And then ask yourself, "How do I resonate with this story? What experiences do I have that make me the disciple I am?" Those are the stories that Jesus would love for you to tell, as you "Proclaim the Good News."

Prayer

Lord Jesus, this text and this sermon have caused us to wonder about you. We wonder what it would be like to encounter you. And yet Lord, we have encountered you in the many ways you appear to us through the ministry we do in your name. Bless us, draw us closer, and inspire us to proclaim the Good News wherever and whenever we have the chance. We pray this in your holy name. Amen