

Community Presbyterian Church  
Cedar City, Utah  
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“Gone Fishing”  
Isaiah 9.1-4, Matthew 4.12-23

A man is fishing one fine day. A friend walks up with his rod and reel, and asks, "How's the fishing?" The first man says, "Fishing's fine." So his friend unpacks all his gear and throws in his line. After about an hour neither one of them has caught a fish. The friend says to the man who was there first, "I thought you said the fishing's fine!" The first man spits out some tobacco juice and says, "Fishing's fine. The catching's not so good."

The story of Jesus calling these first disciples in Matthew, Mark and Luke is familiar to just about all of us. All of them are fishermen, of course.

Before the four fishermen are called, however, we hear that Jesus' cousin John has been arrested. We are not told here by whom or why, but we know it was Herod Antipas and because John had been condemning Herod and his wife Herodias, in public, for a marriage that violated the ancient Law of Moses.

We are told, in response to John's arrest, that Jesus withdraws to Galilee, far away from Jerusalem and the political and religious establishment there. Apparently he returns to his hometown Nazareth for awhile, but soon leaves his village for the seaside town of Capernaum. Nazareth and Capernaum sit in the ancient homelands of the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulon. So, says Matthew, is another prophecy about the Messiah fulfilled:

- 15 "Land of Zebulon, land of Naphtali,  
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the  
Gentiles —  
16 the 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."

That is a close rendering of a part of what we read today from Isaiah, chapter 9. Matthew, as you may remember, is intent on showing how Jesus fulfills the prophecies regarding the Messiah, and his gospel is filled with references to those prophecies.

Verse 17. It's only one verse, but it's an important verse. "From that time, Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Why is this verse important? Because early in his gospel Matthew has already drawn the reader's attention to the importance of repentance, discipleship, and behavior in response to discipleship. For most of this new year we will be working our way through Matthew's gospel. Watch and listen carefully as he presses us continually to adopt new ways of living, new ways of serving, and new ways of being sold-out followers of Jesus.

"Repent, Jesus tells us, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. In fact, it has come near with his coming in the flesh to be one of us. You will also be hearing much about the kingdom of heaven in Matthew's gospel. Watch and listen carefully in the chapters to come as Jesus works to define and describe that kingdom. Most important, know that the kingdom is already present, already here, already real, because he has come. When he returns, the kingdom will be made whole and complete.

Jesus goes walking along the Sea of Galilee, really a freshwater lake, of course, but often called a sea because of its size. There he finds two brothers, Andrew and Peter, who are throwing their nets into the sea from their boat. Jesus calls them saying, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately, Matthew says, they leave their nets and follow. Jesus walks a little further down the shore, presumably with the two brothers in tow, and finds two more brothers, James and John the sons of Zebedee who are on the shore mending their nets. And he calls them as well. Immediately they leave their boat and their father, and they follow.

We have grown so used to this story that we no longer see very easily or well how amazing it is. It's like those TV or radio commercials that you hear five times in an hour, and again and again for weeks. I don't know about you, but I turn on the CD player or hit the mute button. We don't exactly do that with scripture, but we do become inured to the familiar stories, even the most amazing ones.

These four men have security, income, a livelihood, skills, collateral, properties, families, fathers and mothers. Immediately, we are told, they leave all of these things and follow this man who looks no different from any other man they have ever seen. What would prompt them to do that? One commentator has described the situation this way:

“From the earliest human laws or codes, such as those of Hammurabi in the twenty-fourth to the twenty-first century BC we find the establishment of formal standards to measure "things" and "goods." A person's worth was determined by what that person possessed. The person who had the most, or who had access to the most, was literally of the most worth. Not only was the person blessed in light of community standards of value, but it was believed that they were blessed by the Supreme Goods-Provider, and hence most beloved. Earthly power was concentrated in the hands of those who had a plentitude of God's creation. Possessions and ownership conferred special social status.”

“The material habitat and issues of plentitude became an obsession, as human beings fell in love with the by-products of creation, rather than with the One who did the creating. While the by-products were essential to survival, the "better portion" had been largely omitted from human understanding, as increasingly the value placed upon "things" and "goods" resulted in human attempts to re-order God's creation. Humans vested with power those who had or distributed the greatest amount of goods.”

“The reverence for plentitude, presided over by earthly kings, who had earthly priests to evoke the authority and wrath of one god or another to justify the king's authority, became the determinant factor in history. Earthly warriors, guards and militia transmitted the wrath of their leaders, who acted as god(s) to recalcitrant and dissident followers. They, in turn, solicited the help of self-serving scribes, tax-collectors and other bureaucratic functionaries to help keep the whole convoluted mess in some kind of workable order for the supposed welfare of the people or nation. It was to this historical context that Jesus came, proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven had drawn near.”

“In asserting that God's kingdom had come near, Jesus is claiming that a new empowerment is close at hand, bringing to a climax the original intent of the Creator for the created. Walking by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus sees two brothers who are fishing. He startles them by saying, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people.””

“What are we to make of this, in light of this background information concerning the measurement of "value"? One thing which we might conclude is that the value of "goods" and "things" which have produced

security and conferred status is challenged by Jesus. His mysterious offer receives what is to us a surprising response as the fishermen leave their boat, nets, livelihoods, and family—to follow him.”

“The Gospel writer’s intention is to illustrate that the opportunity Jesus advances is of more worth than everything that has been traditionally of highest value. The fishermen’s immediate response to Jesus is Matthew’s exclamation point to the new in-breaking of Jesus’ spiritual power.”<sup>1</sup>

What made the disciples give up their homes and families and livelihood and security and income? It is not clear from Matthew’s account if Jesus had spent time with the four men before he calls them beside the sea. Certainly that is possible, and indeed perhaps even more compelling. Suppose that they had spend hours, days, even weeks listening to him, sitting at his feet. Suppose that they had been stunned by the words he spoke, words of clarity and truth and compassion and peace. Words like they had never heard before. Suppose that as they toiled at the boats and nets they wrestled with those words and with who this man was. And then one day he walks down the shore and calls them. And they have no choice but to follow. I could see that happening.

What was it that made the disciples give up all they owned and all their security? It was this man, unlike anyone they had ever met. And that’s really the only thing that will make us follow, too. For we are called just as surely as are Peter, Andrew, James, and John. If it was anyone else, we would think he was crazy loco. But it’s not anyone else. It is Jesus, identified in chapter two as the Son of God. It is the Messiah, God’s Anointed One. We hear his voice in the scriptures. We hear his voice in prayer. We hear his voice in the silence. Sometimes we hear his voice from others. And the voice still says, “Come. Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” For we are just as surely called to tell others about him as were the four disciples. We should also be so overwhelmed with his presence and compassion and peace, that we can do nothing else. We are driven to compassionately share his message with the world. The kingdom of heaven has come near.

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<sup>1</sup> This material on the traditional view of possessions is drawn from Steven Berry, [www.goodpreacher.com](http://www.goodpreacher.com), Theological Themes: Matthew 4:12-23.

Did you know that something like 75% of people who begin attending worship and then become more active in a church do so at the invitation of a friend? You and I are called to be fishers of people, too. Bring a friend.

Very few of us are called to give up jobs and families and security, but we are all called to risk something. To follow this Messiah is to take risks. What is he calling you and me to do? What is he calling you and me to risk?

He is calling you and me. Do you hear? Come, follow me. Come, follow me. Come, follow me.