

January 22, 2023  
Year A  
3 Epiphany  
Isaiah 9:1-4  
Psalm 27:1, 5-13  
1 Corinthians 1:10-18  
Matthew 4:12-23

Some of you might know that today is the annual pulpit swap for the Clarke County Ministerium. When Pastor Jonathan asked me several weeks ago if I would be participating, I said I didn't think so, because it seemed to me to be inappropriate to have someone else preaching to you all, the day after I'd officially dedicated myself to preaching to you. I wanted to be **here** today.

And today we see Jesus moving to Capernaum by the sea, and calling fishermen to follow him in his ministry. There is a lot to unpack in this passage, and it would be helped by a little context—both in terms of history, and of its place in Matthew's gospel. You might remember that just before this, Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, and then the Holy Spirit drove him into the wilderness for 40 days to be tempted by the devil. We'll talk a lot more about the wilderness experience at another time, but right now let's call that Jesus's spiritual formation intensive. When he finishes his time in the wilderness, he goes home to find that his cousin John the Baptist had been arrested. Imagine how that might have been for him. The last time he'd seen his cousin, John had been the catalyst for the amazing experience of God telling Jesus that he was God's son. Now John was in jail.

But now Jesus knows who he is, and what he is supposed to be doing, and perhaps he is even galvanized by John's arrest, so he sets off to Capernaum. Matthew says the location is in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy about the Messiah coming from the "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles." At the time when Isaiah was preaching, the gentiles in Galilee were the Assyrians, who were in control in 733 BCE. In Jesus's time, of course, the Romans were in charge. And the hearers of Matthew's gospel would have known that, and they also would have known that the

fishermen whom Jesus met on the Sea of Galilee were under contract to the Roman Empire. In order to fish in their own country, the Jews had to enter into contract with their conquerors, and pay a hefty portion of everything they caught to Rome. In some cases the fish had to be of a certain quality, as well.

So Andrew and Simon Peter are not simply fishing for themselves and their families. They had to fish first for Rome, then they could think of their family's needs. When Jesus calls them, he's calling them to follow him, and at the same time there's this idea that following him is turning their backs on Rome. If these men are following the Messiah, they are not following Herod, or the Roman Emperor. Already Jesus is disrupting the status quo.

But why is it that Andrew, Simon Peter, James and John were so eager to drop their nets and follow Jesus? Doesn't that strike you as unusual? It's impossible for us to know exactly why these men did what they did, but we do know that Jesus was a charismatic, and attractive person. It's possible that the men knew who he was—that word had already gotten around about him. We don't know for sure. But we do know that they made the decision to drop their nets and follow Jesus. Somehow they realized that nothing was more important than following Jesus. Not mending nets, not catching fish—not even helping Dad in the family business. They immediately put down their nets and followed him.

Jesus tells us ALL to follow him. That really, there is nothing that is more important than that. We all need to be like Andrew, and Simon Peter, and James and John and put down **our** nets. Put down the things that keep us from following Jesus: the distractions, the addictions, even the professions, if they keep us from following Him.

And following Him means different things for different people. I have a friend who is a law professor, and also serves as senior warden in her church. For a long time, she resisted any leadership position there, saying that she didn't have time to do it. But she said God wouldn't

leave her alone. Eventually she dropped her nets, and made time to be on the vestry.

And then there is the woman who repairs and refurbishes used vestments that are then shipped to parishes all over the world who need them. She's a retired seamstress, and she dropped her net of using her skills for profit.

A couple of days ago I heard about a man who owns a very successful shipping company, who tells about his vision of Jesus saying to him, "whatever you do for the least of these, you do for me." This inspired him to drop the net of making a huge profit, and he turned his entire company into an enterprise that ships food for the poor.

Jesus says to follow him. Put down your nets. Amen.