

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
3rd Sunday after Epiphany
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Timeless Call, Fresh Response

Isaiah 9:1-4; Matthew 4:12-23

I'd like to begin today with a little introspection.
What brought you here today?
Why are you here, in worship, today?

I expect, if we dug around a bit, we'd get a lot of different answers.
We, no doubt, have come to worship today for a variety of reasons,
with a variety of motivations, and a diversity of causes.
Think with me: Why are you in worship today? [Pause]

Has it become a habit for you, and you've stopped thinking about why?
Is it because you are intellectually interested in God
or, perhaps, curious about Jesus?
Do you have questions about the meaning of your life –
big existential questions that you hope to find answers for?
Or has Jesus touched your life in a some transformative way
so that you feel compelled to be here?
Perhaps you sense somehow that God is calling you to a certain way of life?
If you're a man, maybe you are here for the same reason many American men attend,
because your wife makes you come.
Or, of you are a teenager, because your parents make you come.
[Although, I am compelled to observe,
based on the number of youth who are not in these pews on Sunday morning,
our parents don't seem to be requiring worship attendance so much anymore –
much to the detriment of our youth, i must say;
not to mention the cause of Christ.
If that crackles some toes, so sorry.]
Or perhaps you are here because you have suffered in some way,
and you are deeply aware of your need for God,
and so you are here in search of healing.
Or maybe you're here for what have become cultural reasons:
you need your child baptized,
or you need to be married,
or you need your child to be confirmed,
because that's what good people do,
and so you've found your way into the place
where those kinds of things are done.
Or are you disillusioned by the darkness of the world
and in search of a light in that darkness?
Perhaps, you feel somehow called to do something for God,
to make a difference in the world in some way.
Or perhaps you are joining Fourth today,
which means you have actually given thought to this question recently.

Today in the Gospel of Matthew,
we find a collection of followers gathering around Jesus,
not entirely unlike our collection here.

But the most prominent, the most compelling,
are those fishermen whom Jesus has just called to follow him.
Simon and his brother Andrew, James and his brother John.
Why, exactly, they follow Jesus on such short notice is a bit of a mystery:
Are they compelled to follow by the sheer, spiritual force of Jesus' invitation?
Is Jesus just that charismatic, that they are enticed beyond all sound reasoning?
Or have they met him before, and they've been considering it already?

Matthew tells us that Jesus had begun to proclaim his message in Galilee,
calling people to "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Then, after calling these fishermen, Jesus goes about Galilee teaching
and continuing to proclaim his message of good news.
But more than just a message, he begins a ministry of healing people —
people with disease and sickness, pain and paralysis,
epilepsy and demon-possession.

These, too, begin to follow him. The ones he has touched and cured.
They want to be near the one who has transformed their lives
and given them a fresh start.

Soon Jesus' message and his ministry catapult him to regional fame —
not only Galilee, Matthew says,
but up into Syria to the North,
Southeast, to the Decapolis,
South to Jerusalem, and Southwest to Judea,
and further East beyond the Jordan,
people are hearing about Jesus,
and great crowds begin to follow him.
Surely, among those crowds, we can find many of the same motivations
we find in those who are drawn to Jesus today.

So, at this point in the Gospel of Matthew,
we get a picture of the followers of Jesus which looks more like
a messy, loosely affiliated hodgepodge
of the needy, the curious, the disillusioned,
and the genuinely, passionately called.

But the ones who come to the forefront in this scene,
are those fishermen to whom Jesus issues an unambiguous call.

And in response
they drop their nets — that is, their livelihood, their vocation —
and they follow him at once.

James' and John's response is so immediate
that they leave their poor father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men
in the middle of the workday!

It reminds us that in another place in Matthew's gospel,
there is a man who wants to follow Jesus,
but asks if he can first go bury his father,
but Jesus answers,

Follow me and leave the dead to bury their own dead.

Are we to assume he held the same expectation for these first disciples?

This is a demanding call,
even more so than Elijah,
who at least grants Elisha permission to go kiss his father and mother
before he leaves.

So these men, who are engaged in their livelihood,
who are working hard to to make a living for themselves and their families,
are called by Jesus to break with everyday affairs,
and to make a bold and risky sacrifice
to follow him.

It is worth noting that the way Jesus gained his disciples
was not typical of the other rabbis of his day.

In the rabbinic literature of those days,
anyone who wanted a master was instructed to
“Choose a teacher and get thee a companion.”

**But Jesus, as a charismatic, prophetic teacher like Elijah,
chose his disciples: they did not chose him.¹**

Even so, they were apparently ready to receive the call.

Apparently, God had already been at work on them and in them,
making them ready by the secret movements of the Holy Spirit within them,
preparing them for the moment when Jesus would appear.

By God's gracious providence,
their journey and Jesus' journey come together
at just the right time and in just the right way.

This is the way God works to call disciples for his kingdom.

So we see that what looks like a chance encounter
given the dramatic response,

must have been long in the making, by the provident hand of God.

And we also see — and cannot avoid — the truth
that these fishermen's response to Jesus
involved tremendous sacrifice.

What does this sacrifice entail?

First of all, their sacrifice involves a change of loyalty,
a change of belonging.

They no longer belong first to their blood family,
but to the family established by the call of Christ.

Secondly, they leave one **daily occupation** for another.

Their call is to become itinerate missionaries of God's kingdom.
Their call is to homeless wandering with Jesus.

That is to say, two of our most defining realities in life,
family and vocation,

were drastically altered for these disciples when Jesus called them.

In this story "we have before us the birth of the Christian mission.

...the birth of the church,

the decisive moment when people first threw in their lot with the cause of Jesus."²

And we cannot escape this fundamental fact that all who follow Jesus,
not just Peter and Andrew and James and John,

**are called in some way to leave behind the past
and embrace a new future.**

But at this point,

we have to ask the question: **what can this mean for us?**

In just a few moments [in the second service today]

we will receive new members into the church,

and they will respond positively to the question:

"Will you be Christ's faithful disciples, obeying his word and showing his love?"

And at the close of the service we will sing,

"Today we all are called to be disciples of the Lord."

But does that mean we are all called to be itinerate missionaries?

Are we called to give up our livelihood and spend all our time every day
walking the streets of Greenville proclaiming the kingdom?

If that's what we mean, then, apparently, the church has never actually been faithful.

So what does our faithful response to this timeless call look like today?

Well, we might begin by asking, what did it look like for the first hearers of Matthew's gospel,
for Matthew's community of faith?

Matthew was obviously an educated man, with a good Greek vocabulary.

qualities that while not out of the question for a rural man,

were in those days more likely for a city dweller, perhaps of some means.

Based on his weaving together of other gospel traditions in his own gospel like Mark and the so-called “Q” source,
we gather that Matthew lived in a significant center of the Christian faith where he had access to these other traditions.
Unlike Mark, Matthew uses the word *polis*, or city, some 26 times, and he softens the portrait of Jesus as a homeless itinerant, saying that he *made his home in Capernaum*.
Matthew is also less strident than Mark and Luke in his attitude toward the rich, softening the beatitude from “blessed are the poor” to “blessed are the poor *in spirit*.”
and dropping altogether the story of the widow’s mite.

New Testament scholar Dale Allison suggests that
“Matthew was more ready than the other evangelists to accommodate the tradition to his apparently more wealthy congregation... and that...he may have been more or less at home among the well-to-do.

This in turn implies that he could hardly have expected or wished all of his readers to imitate Peter and the others in forsaking property and livelihood.
It follows, then, that [this call story], at least within its context in Matthew, must be interpreted not as setting forth a rigid precedent but as being illustrative of the general nature of discipleship.”

It was “an example of whole-hearted obedience to the cause of Jesus.”

But...and this is a big but...

The demand remains that we are called to be like the disciples
“insofar as they were **unreservedly obedient** to the word that came to them, even to the point of **great sacrifice**.”³

We may not be called to be rid of all wealth and to forsake our kin, but to direct our wealth and conduct our family life with a strong orientation toward the kingdom of God.

**Discipleship, in the end,
has to do with making a fresh response
to the timeless call of Christ.**

The call of Christ presents us each with a choice:

Will you leave here today as a curious passerby, one of the crowd, who overhears Jesus’ message to others?

Or will you respond? Will you turn your life toward God?

Will you adopt a way of life that seeks to reflect the kingdom of God?

Will you sit at the feet of Jesus, and listen to him with your whole being?

Will your love for God and for God’s Son compel you to engage in habits and practices of abiding in God like coming to worship — regularly?

Habits and practices that make your life different, focused, that make your life a reflection of the light that shines in the darkness?

Regardless of what brought you here today
perhaps the Holy Spirit is working in your heart,
and you are ready to make
a fresh response to the timeless call of God.

*Follow me, Jesus says to you,
and I will make you fishers of people*

Follow me, and I will make you my disciples.

How about you?

¹ Dale Allison, *International Critical Commentary: Matthew 1-7* (London: T&T Clark International, 1988) 394

²Allison, 404

³ Allison, 405-6