

sermon-01/27/08 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Responding Immediately”
Matthew 4:12-23

If you were in worship last Sunday, today’s text in Matthew might have surprised you. Matthew’s version of the calling of Andrew and Peter is quite different than the gospel of John’s version. In John, Andrew is a disciple of John the Baptist. After Jesus’ baptism, John points him out to Andrew as the Lamb of God. Andrew follows and eventually invites his brother Simon to follow as well.

In Matthew, Andrew and Peter live in Capernaum in Galilee. They are fishermen. They meet Jesus, apparently for the first time, while they are fishing together. Jesus calls them to follow him.

I don’t think we can get to the bottom of this peculiar difference between these two gospels to figure out what really happened. We can, however, ask ourselves what the gospel writers were trying to emphasize in their way of telling the story.

John, for one thing, emphasizes Jesus’ wonderful question: “What are you looking for?” Such a question has inspired many sermons. Matthew, on the other hand, has a different agenda in his call story. It is to that agenda that we turn to now.

Jesus is not by the Jordan River, near John the Baptist, when he calls his first disciples in Matthew. In fact, John has already been arrested says Matthew. This makes a big impression on Jesus. Matthew says he withdraws to Galilee. He did not want a confrontation with Herod at this time. Instead, he goes into exile in Galilee. Jesus, in Matthew, is a political exile once again, as he was at his birth when he fled to Egypt with his parents.

He chooses to live in Galilee, partly because it is far away from Jerusalem and Herod. But Galilee is an interesting choice for other reasons. It is full of Gentiles. That means Jesus was going to work out his ministry in a multi-cultural, multi-religious context. That should be a great comfort to Christians today who find themselves in the same context. It is certainly true of Christians on the Eastside here in Bellevue.

One commentator has said Galilee, because it was so multi-cultural, was much more open to new ideas than was the area around Jerusalem. Jesus is drawn to an area where people might be able to think outside the box in terms of their religion. They would have to do that if they were going to accept his reinterpretation of what it meant to be the Messiah.

Once in Capernaum, Jesus begins to proclaim the exact same message we heard John saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Jesus and John are on the same page here.

Repent is a crucial word in this proclamation. It is not about being sorrowful or full of remorse as many of us think when we hear repent today. One commentator describes

repentance this way. It is all about “a change of direction, the gaining of a new set of values, the readiness for life under the reign of God.” Another scholar puts it more bluntly. “Get yourself a new orientation for the way you live. Then act on it.”

Jesus felt the kingdom of heaven was very near. It was so close, in fact, that it influenced the present. We may not fully experience a world where God reigns while we live on this earth, but we can feel its pull. We are being lured into a new reality if we give in to the kingdom’s values.

Jesus decides he needs to work as a team. The kingdom of heaven is all about community. So he calls Peter and Andrew, then James and John. In Matthew, Jesus comes to us. In John’s gospel, Andrew follows Jesus and then is given a call. But in Matthew, Jesus makes the first move.

What is fascinating in Matthew’s version, is that Jesus comes to these fishermen when they are not looking for anything. They don’t, as one commentary notes, have any obvious need or void they want filling. They are busy at work. To follow Jesus is going to be a huge disruption.

The text makes it clear that Peter and Andrew leave their work to follow Jesus. James and John not only leave their work, they leave their father as well. For Matthew, God’s call in Christ is more important than work or even family ties.

Not only do these fishermen leave work and family, Matthew makes a big point of saying they left them immediately. They don’t check their calendars to see if they can work God into their schedule. They don’t make sure they have enough in the bank to leave their work to follow Jesus. There is no hedging their bets when they throw their life into following this call. There is a kind of abandon to their actions here. It is scary. Is that expected of us?

Of course, the big question is: why did they do this? What happened here? They meet Jesus for the first time and he comes up with this weird calling about fishing for people. That is not exactly the most attractive metaphor for discipleship in the Bible. In fact, some have said it never really caught on. Shepherding sheep has gotten more traction among Christians than fishing for people. It conjures up some of our worst images about evangelism.

Still, we ask, why did they follow Jesus? Was it because he was so charismatic they couldn’t help themselves? Matthew puts Jesus’ temptations in the desert right before this passage. It was in those temptations where Jesus got his priorities straight. Someone who knows him or herself so well that they aren’t tempted to be someone else can be very attractive and charismatic. Was that it?

Maybe they were bored with their life and jumped at a new adventure. Perhaps, but somehow that does not ring true. There was something going on here that changed these

men's priorities. What does it take to hear such a call and respond immediately no matter what the cost?

First off, I think Matthew was exaggerating to make a point when he said it was immediately. My guess would be this choosing to follow Jesus was a process. They probably went back to fishing the next day, but something happened to them, even if it was a process, that changed their lives for good. They were able to give their full selves to following Jesus. They were able to prioritize their lives where being faithful to God was seen as more important than work or family obligations. How did this happen?

Repentance is a critical word here. There was something about Jesus that forced them to look at their lives from a very different perspective. He got under their normal defenses and touched them where their dreams lived, where they made sense out of life.

Have you ever read a book, seen a movie, or met someone that had that affect on you? I suspect many of us have. There have been books in my life that I can point back to that have utterly redefined how I look at things. There was no going back to the old way of thinking or organizing my life after reading those books. Biblically, you could say, I repented after being encountered by God's Spirit in those books.

How about you? Where have you sensed God's call so persuasively that you could do no other but follow? Some of you heard God calling you to adopt a child. Some have heard the call to go and build houses in Katrina ravaged areas or in Haiti. Some have dressed in black and stood on street corners calling people to peace. Some have even become an elder or deacon and it has changed your perspective on God and church membership forever. You have heard God calling and you took the risk.

Frederick Buechner describes the call to seek a vocation this way. He says, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." I am sure you have heard that before, but it is still the best definition of vocation and call I have come across.

This text draws us into asking ourselves some really good, but tough questions. Where do we need repentance? Where does our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet? When do we decide to just let that call hook us? This passage is all about fish or cut bait. The kingdom of God is so near you can almost feel it. Repent and then act on it. Amen