



Roanoke, Virginia

January 22, 2023

“Until Our Hearts Find a Home”

Matthew 4:12-23

Rev. Elizabeth N.H. Link

In Matthew 3, Jesus had just been baptized by his cousin John and claimed as God’s Son by a voice from heaven. Earlier in Ch4, Jesus declined the devil’s tempting in the desert. In 4:12, Jesus hears of John the Baptist’s arrest, and his response is to immediately withdraw to Galilee.

Like his cousin John before him, Jesus preaches that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. He moves quickly to invite the first disciples to join him. They leave their families, livelihoods, and join Jesus for little in return. As “fishers of men,” they are invited to take part, not coerced or forced into something (like the Roman military), but inspired to participate in it.

Matthew 4:12-23. ¹²Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, 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—

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.’

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



¹⁸ As 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 lake—for they were fishermen. ¹⁹And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fishers of 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.

²³ Jesus 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.

Before our daughter was born, I remember dreaming about the sound of her voice. I believed what I had read, that a baby in utero can hear the voice of its mother before he or she is ever born. She had heard my voice, but *I* had never heard *her* voice before. And I wondered and dreamed about what it would sound like – as a newborn when she cried, as a baby when she started to laugh, as a toddler when she began to sound out new words and phrases.

It’s a precious gift, to be able to hear and recognize the voice of someone you love. We miss the voices of those who aren’t with us anymore – though sometimes the ways they said our names or turned a phrase still comes back to us every now and then.

Roger Nishioka shares that as a child, his family would sit together on Sunday nights in front of the TV to eat dinner during the nature program, “Wild Kingdom.” One particular episode focused on the elephant seals of Argentina, and in particular, on a mother and her seal pup, who had just been born. Soon after giving birth, the mother seal, now famished, abandoned the pup on the beach so she could go feed in the waters. After feeding, she returned to a different spot on the shore and began to call out for her baby. Other mothers had done the same, and returned around the same time. There were so many seals, and, to Rodger, they all looked alike. He remembers thinking the two would never find each other.ⁱ

The camera followed the mother as she called to her pup and listened for his response. Call and response, call and response. Following each other’s voices, soon the mother and pup were reunited.

Interestingly, more recent scientific studies have shown that these seal mothers and their pups can recognize one another’s voice after only two hours from birth. One particular pup in this study, recognized the playback of its mother’s recorded voice after having heard it only one time. This signifies to scientists that the pups may begin learning their mother’s voice while in the womb.ⁱⁱ

The incredible thing, Rodger points out in his story, is that *this* is how it is with God. Just as these seals are imprinted with one another’s sound and scent from the beginning, “We are imprinted with a memory of God, and God is imprinted with a memory of us, and even if it takes a lifetime, we will find each other.”ⁱⁱⁱ



Our text from Matthew describes the start of Jesus' public ministry. He has been baptized by John, returned from the wilderness, and now we see him calling his first disciples along the Sea of Galilee. The four men, all fishermen, were hard at work, when Matthew says they immediately left what they were doing and followed Jesus.

Matthew doesn't explain this further (though a different telling of this story in John 1:35-37 seems to). We wonder if these men already knew Jesus – they may have moved in the same circles, had mutual friends. Perhaps Peter, Andrew, James and John had seen some of the amazing things Jesus was capable of, or perhaps they were simply up for an adventure. All Matthew shares, however, is that Jesus called out to them, and immediately they responded. Call and response. It is as though they had been waiting all their lives to hear his voice.

In ancient times, respectable teachers usually waited for disciples to choose them. Only the most radical sages were known to choose their own disciples. But that's exactly what happens here, and again and again – Jesus calls; we respond.

Many years ago, I was in Anderson Auditorium at a Montreat Youth Conference with my high school youth group. The keynote speaker shared this gospel story, as a group of teenagers dramatically acted out the scene on the stage behind him. I remember wondering whether I could ever be brave enough to step out of the boat, step away from all I knew, all that was comfortable, and follow.

Looking back on those days, I felt a tug toward ministry early on, but I couldn't see why or how God would choose to use someone like me. I wasn't bold or particularly brave, I wouldn't have described myself as a good public speaker or someone who even liked the attention of a crowd. Over time, however, the call grew louder and the tug became more like a shove. Like all seminarians I wondered if I had it in me to truly follow. I hadn't had many female role models in ministry, and as encouraged by others as I was, it's taken time for me to find my voice. It's an ongoing exercise for all pastors, I'm sure, as we grow in maturity and experience.

In July of 2009, I was ordained in my home church in SC. The first person to follow me out onto the front lawn after I gave the benediction was the church's pastor emeritus, the Rev. Ray White. He was tall and slim, and his kind arms enfolded me in a warm embrace. Then he held me at arms' length and said, "Elizabeth, God made you – God made all of you. Be yourself. Don't try to speak or dress or preach like anyone else. God made you just as you are. And God called YOU. So be yourself, Elizabeth, be you."

I don't think I felt the true gift of those words until I've heard them echo around inside me over these years. These were just the words I needed to carry with me as I approached a hospital bedside, a pulpit, or a committee meeting. And these are just the words that help crack open Jesus' call to his first disciples in a new way for me.



Because when Jesus called Simon, Andrew, James, and John, he did not invite them to abandon who they were; he invited them to become their most authentic selves. He invited them to live into the fullness of the *Imago Dei*, the image of God, they were born with from the start.

Jesus' invitation to these first disciples was specific and particular. They were fishermen. He invites them to become fishers of men. What metaphor would make more sense to four fishermen than the metaphor of fishing for people? Jesus knew them. He knew them inside and out. And he called them, just as they were, to come and follow him.

When Jesus called these ordinary men, it was not a call to leave their intelligence or experience behind, but a call to bring the best of their core selves forward – “to become even more fully and freely themselves.”^{iv}

“Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” In this line, there is an invitation into a different kind of community. These men are being invited to be citizens of a different kind of reign, and their presence in this new reign matters. “I will make you fish for people” is indicative of how different this community is going to be and what defines it. It's not, “I will make you fish for the right kind of people,” or “I will make you fish for perfect people.”

In choosing to follow, these fishermen are choosing to *be*, to live, in a different kind of kingdom. As fishermen in a first century Roman occupied state, they would have purchased a lease or contract with Rome's agents that allowed them to fish and would have obligated them to supply a certain quantity of fish.^v So, by choosing Jesus, they're choosing God's rule over Rome. They choose to “fish” their land and the people in it for God's purposes rather than to exploit it for Rome's gain. Jesus wants them to catch people for God's rule, a rule of mercy and justice and plenty. In deciding to follow him, these men choose to make their home in God's kingdom. It's like there are two worlds. We can choose to live in the empire, or we can choose to make our home, find our way, furthering God's reign.

Often, when we think of calling, we think of these first disciples and all that they gave up – two leaving their father, all leaving their livelihoods. Or perhaps when you think of calling, you may picture a priest or a pastor. It's easy to look at someone in a robe or a clerical collar and recognize a calling. But it's not always so obvious. I bet a lot of people have a hard time seeing a direct connection between what they do for a living and what they believe. But I believe that calling is less about what we *do* than who we *are*. God's call isn't simply to *do* something, but to *be* something.

The call to follow is not the same for all of us. When we are called to follow Jesus, more often than not, it is with the unique particularity of our lives. God knows our backgrounds, our skills, our educations, our memories.

Maybe that is what made it possible for John the Baptist to proclaim the coming Messiah? God called him to *be* the forerunner, no matter what that might mean. Is that what summoned the



immediate response in Peter and Andrew, James and John, that they felt called to *be* more? They most likely have no idea what being “fishers of people” exactly means, but they know that Jesus speaks to something deep within them. They have no real idea of what Jesus is calling them to do, but perhaps they know who Jesus is calling them to *be*.

The disciples’ immediate acceptance of Jesus’ invitation is dramatic. Occasionally, we too stand at a fork in the road. We have moments when we act in ways we cannot understand. Some people have an extraordinary moment when they decide to become a social worker who cares for the vulnerable, or a teacher who makes a difference, or an attorney who makes the world a little more just.... Some men and women live heroic and astonishing lives because of their faith.

But most of the time, our call is not all that dramatic. We don’t often drop everything and start a new life. I think that perhaps our calling as disciples is less about what we *do* – meaning, our vocation is less about our occupation – and more about who we *are*. God isn’t just calling us to *do* something, but rather to *be* something.

Jesus issues the same call to us – to be in genuine relationships with the people around us, and to be in those relationships the way Jesus was and is. The call is in bearing one another’s burdens, caring for the sick and vulnerable, standing by the persecuted and the downtrodden, always with the hope and promise of God’s abundant grace. Sometimes that call will take us far away from home and sometimes it will take shape right where we are planted.

We can trust the one who calls us. He knows us by name; he’d recognize us anywhere. He made us just as we are. And he loves us and calls us anyway.

Jesus’ invitation is good news. There must be something in his voice, something in that tug. He calls, may we respond.

ⁱ David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. *Feasting on the Word, Vol. 1 Year A* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 284, 286.

ⁱⁱ Mary Bates, “Rapid Vocal Recognition in Fur Seal Moms and Pups” in *Psychology Today* (www.psychologytoday.com), Dec 13, 2022.

ⁱⁱⁱ David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. *Feasting on the Word, Vol. 1 Year A* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 284, 286.

^{iv} Debie Thomas, “I Will Make You” in www.journeywithjesus.net, Jan 19, 2020.

^v Jillian Engelhardt, “Commentary on Matthew 4:12-23” www.WorkingPreacher.org, for Jan 22, 2023.

