

**SECOND READING:** 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 sea, 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— 16the 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.”

18As 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 sea—for they were fishermen. 19And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for 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.

23Jesus 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. This is the word of the Lord. **THANKS be to God.**

FIRST SCRIPTURE READING: Isaiah 9:1-4

9But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. 2The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. 3You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. 4For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

## “The Call”

It seems at first a bit surprising that when it came time for Jesus to begin his ministry – to preach, teach, heal, and choose his followers, Jesus did not go to Nazareth where he was from and where he might feel more at home, or to Jerusalem, the religious center of Judaism, but instead, he went to a far-flung Roman town on the northern coast of the Sea of Galilee, called Capernaum. There he called 4 simple Jewish fishermen to be his disciples.<sup>1</sup> Why there and why them?

Well, scholars tell us that Jesus went to Capernaum to fulfill prophecy, the prophecy that Nancy read this morning in Isaiah. For Naphtali, where Capernaum is found, was one of the two tribes to first go into exile under Assyria back in 8<sup>th</sup> c BCE, and thus, one of the first that might be expected to be restored. Isaiah 9 affirms this in saying that with the appearance of the Messiah, light will dawn on those who walked in darkness and peace and justice will be restored. However, there is more. As Matthew’s gospel will come to show us, God’s mission is not just for Jews but for everyone. *Repeat.* Jesus went to Capernaum because it was a place of primarily Roman Gentiles, and Jesus’ redemption, there announced, there inaugurated, was clearly then not to just Judeans or Galilean Jews, but for even those who held them captive.<sup>2</sup> It was/is for us all. Additionally, God’s justice was going to be brought not through the powerful, but by means of the lowliest, not through the town’s leaders or citizens who hold wealth and power, not to the intellectuals, but through people like these young fishermen who have been brought up in the family business. “*Follow me,*” he told them, “*and I will make you fishers of people.*”

“Unlikely people from an unlikely place: this is how God makes disciples.” This is what Rev. Amy Starr Redwing say and she’s so right. It’s somewhat God’s MO. *Years ago, Rev. Sam Wells received a visit from a man he barely knew, the CEO of a prominent corporation in the city where Wells served as a pastor. Wells had met the man a few times before and noticed*

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<sup>1</sup>Mark Ramsey. “Cloaked” [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5727a36160b5e9b2e3b5d20d/t/57c0b316e4fcb561cb778486/1472246550587/2016\\_0612\\_Sermon\\_Cloaked\\_MR.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5727a36160b5e9b2e3b5d20d/t/57c0b316e4fcb561cb778486/1472246550587/2016_0612_Sermon_Cloaked_MR.pdf) (accessed 1-20-23).

<sup>2</sup>Stanley Saunders. Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture. In: Joel Green, Thomas Long, Luke Powery, et al. Connections. A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship. Year 1, Vol 1 (Louisville: WJKP; 2019), 204-205.

*that he always looked just a little disheveled, in spite of all his accomplishments. The day he dropped by, he sat in the corner of Well's study, chewing his fingernails and holding, rather nervously, a home-made cassette tape. Wells says, "I guessed that small talk wasn't what my visitor had come for. The man finally said: 'I've come to see you because there is no one else I can tell. I want to be a Christian. In my world that's like saying I'm crazy. Last night I got up in the early hours and made this tape and it says what I want to say, and I want to leave it with you because there's no one else I can give it to.'" And he handed over the tape.*

For this man, Wells knew that handing over the tape was as momentous as Peter and Andrew setting down their fishing nets and James and John walking away from their father's boat. And that is what they did, you see. They left their homes, their families, their occupations, all that was comfortable, familiar and which provided security for them. As Brian Blount puts it, *"they walked off their boats and walked out into some other life, with some odd man who had just come off a 40 day homeless gig out in the desert. No questions asked. They just followed him. Their families must have all been looking on and pointing and saying, 'Just look at these fools! Look at 'em. They just left everything and followed.'"*<sup>3</sup> Eugene Boring says that *"There is no parallel to such an unmotivated call story in all of ancient literature. It is unparalleled because it is unexplainable. ...That the simple fishermen have a boat and employees indicates that they are not penniless peasants; they have something to leave, and they just leave it."*<sup>4</sup>

Right. Now, there is a lot of speculation about what could have made these first disciples drop everything to follow Jesus ...that they knew him already, that they were looking for adventure, and such— but it is all just that, speculation. The bottom line is that there is no real sense to this story. All there is, is flames.<sup>5</sup> Jesus believably came to these unlikely people in an unlikely place proclaiming that God was about to visit and they needed to get ready. This changed them. It transformed them. It lit them on fire. It changed them and they felt it deep in their souls. The fire that fueled their "foolishness" to follow him was Jesus' claim that the

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<sup>3</sup> Brian Blount. "Look at those Fools". Third Sunday after Epiphany. Year A. <https://asermonforeversunday.com/> (accessed 1-20-23).

<sup>4</sup> M. Eugene Boring. "Mark: A Commentary (Louisville: WJKP; 2006), 60-61.

<sup>5</sup> Brian Blount.

Reign of God is here and the Kingdom of God is on the horizon.<sup>6</sup> They suddenly had a new focus in life. And they seized it.

*There was once a wealthy corporate executive named Jack who, with his wife, raised three children who grew up going to worship and Sunday School nearly every week. They were confirmed in the eighth grade and went on mission trips each summer. Their middle daughter, Anna, left New York City to attend college in Atlanta, where she found another church to attend. During Anna's sophomore year, a speaker came to the church to report on his work at an orphanage in a part of Africa ravaged by tribal warfare. At the end of the talk the speaker said, almost in passing, that he needed support for his ministry – not just financial donations, but people who to come and work with him at the orphanage, for a week or a month or a year at a time. Anna called her parents after the talk. She was talking a mile a minute trying to explain to them how amazing this ministry was and how she wanted to get involved. They listened appreciatively, “yes, that sounded wonderful, sure, we'll make a donation,” they said. And they did make a donation, a sizable one. But a few days later, Anna called back and she was still on fire about what she'd heard. “Mom, Dad,” she said, “I think I need to go to Africa.” “It sounds dangerous,” they said. “Can't we just make another donation?” But Anna was determined to go. She had to be there, to see it for herself, to learn from the people, and to serve the children of this orphanage. “Okay, fine,” they finally relented, “why don't you make arrangements to go this summer for a week or two.” “No,” she said. “I want to be a part of this work. This is what God is calling me to do. As soon as the spring semester is over, I want to go for a year. At least.” It took a while for Jack and his wife to come around to the idea, but as much as they worried about her physical safety, they could not help but be moved by her sense of call. Finally, they stopped trying to convince Anna to stay put and instead helped make arrangements for her to go. Still, they secretly hoped she might change her mind. Of course, she didn't, and in June, they put her on a plane. When Jack told the story later to his pastor, he had*

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<sup>6</sup> Brian Blount

*tears in his eyes. "I can't believe she's doing this," he kept saying. "You know, we raised our daughter to be a respectable Christian. We didn't actually want her to be a real one."*<sup>7</sup>

Friends, the imminent, inbreaking of vision of God's Kingdom, is what drives the plot of not only the Call for disciples, but REAL discipleship living. The disciples soon were compelled to cast a line out to others and catch them up in this fever of fishing and following. Caught up in the kingdom vision, all of them, gave all that they could, everything, and they went forth from that shoreline and then fished for people, hooking THEM so that they too would then give everything, even their very lives to God and God's work for justice and righteousness in the world....and then they would fish for more people...and so it went...and so it goes.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus calls us all. He invites us to hold lightly all the things we know, the comforts of our relationships, our knowledge and our stuff, and open ourselves to being transformed and to join the work of transforming God's world, here and now, of helping to bring that kingdom. I know that you, like me, have serious concerns about circumstances in the world around us, things which "get under your skin and into your heart". I feel heartbroken and angry and overwhelmed by the suffering and division all around us...worried by the escalating tensions between the United States and her adversaries, by the ugliness and intractability of the racial and political divide in our country, by the fear felt by millions of immigrants who don't know whether they will ever again have a place to call home, by the suffering in countries like Cameroon and the Congo and Ukraine and Myanmar. Well, God gives us a choice of what we do with our despair and anger. We can stay where we are: in the safe confines of our Nazareth, where things are familiar and we know our place; Or we can go to our Jerusalem, our religious center, where the rituals of our faith comfort us. Or we can recognize our call to Capernaum, to that unlikely place that we haven't been before,<sup>8</sup> so that, once there, we can be changed, lit on fire and compelled to follow him. This is the call.

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<sup>7</sup> Tom Tewell. In: Amy Starr Redwing. "Unlikely People, Unlikely Places" <https://asermonforeversunday.com/sermons/a09-the-third-sunday-after-the-epiphany-year-a-2020/> (accessed 1-20-23).

<sup>8</sup> Amy Starr Redwing. "Unlikely People, Unlikely Places" <https://asermonforeversunday.com/sermons/a09-the-third-sunday-after-the-epiphany-year-a-2020/> (accessed 1-20-23).

Jesus knows this is not easy. For this reason, we follow, not lead. He is there blazing the trail, showing us the way, directing us to other fish who need to be caught and who can join in the cause. But it begins with a decision to come and follow him. Brothers and sisters, it begins with a decision by unlikely people like us in maybe an unlikely place like this, not just today but every single day.

*After that CEO left Sam Wells' study, Wells found himself with the cassette in his hand. He put it in a tape player and pressed play. He heard the sound of the CEO clearing his throat and then a long silence. Then he cleared his throat again and, to Wells' astonishment, this proud, accomplished man began to sing a simple song: "I have decided to follow Jesus. I have decided to follow Jesus. I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back. No turning back."'<sup>9</sup> Amen.*

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<sup>9</sup> Mark Ramsey.