

Gospel**Matthew 4:12-23**

When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee.

He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles--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."

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

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 sea-- for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As 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. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

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.

Follow Me

Do you remember the first time Jesus stopped by your house, or maybe he was in your car, or your office, or maybe he caught up with you on the street? Do you remember when He first said to you, "Follow me." In the Episcopal Church, we don't really have a tradition of witnessing, or testifying, or sharing our conversion stories. We'd rather identify ourselves as "cradle Episcopalians" – people who can truly say, we've always done it this way. Or if we came to this church from another denomination, we are more comfortable talking about why the church speaks to us with its liturgy or theology or more inclusive polity. We aren't so much in the habit of talking about how Jesus speaks to us. We are not a church that insists on a once and for all moment when you accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. We do insist that you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior over and over again, deepening your relationship with him through worship and prayer, study and fellowship, stewardship and service.

Because we are Episcopalians, it is infinitely more complicated and lengthy to share a lifetime of conversion experiences. When people ask me, "Why did you decide to become a priest?" I always ask, "How much time do you have?" It is not a short story and it continues to unfold every day. I mentor a class every Wednesday night called Education for Ministry with a committed group of 9 lay people from a variety of churches in the Baltimore area. We begin each year by sharing our life stories. We call them "spiritual autobiographies." It isn't enough to just tell one another a few dates and places: when you were born, where you grew up, went to school, got married, had kids, etc. Each year, we tell our stories again and again focusing on the way that Jesus' call to us has been unfolding from day 1 to the present. When the group shares their spiritual autobiographies, a level of trust and respect and love takes root and grows with us through the rest of the year together. We become the Body of Christ when we share how Christ has touched us. It may take a fair amount of time, but the community that it builds is worth every second we listen.

In today's Gospel reading, we get to hear the first time that Jesus calls to his closest companions, "Follow me." James and John, Simon and Andrew, they were at work when Jesus

showed up. They were fishermen, a hard job full of strenuous labor and odd hours. Fishing in the sea of Galilee was not a relaxing past time. If you were not out on the water, working your nets and praying for a good catch, you were on the shore mending your nets or working on the boat. These men were busy and yet, something radically changed when Jesus walked by.

Imagine this scene: Andrew and Simon have just cast their net into the water and Jesus arrives. He calls out to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." These two sunburned brothers, muscled, seasoned, lifetime, fishermen do not haul in their net. Matthew says, "Immediately, they left their nets and followed him." They left their nets in the water! What fisherman does that? They are unconcerned with what they might have caught. Not interested in even putting the nets on the boat for future use. They drop everything and follow Jesus. James and John are sitting in their father's boat mending the fishing nets with their dad. Jesus walks by them and issues the same invitation. The two men, raised to take over the fishing business from their father, Zebedee, immediately get up and leave the boat and their dad to follow Jesus. It is life changing to become a disciple.

So, can you remember the first time Jesus stopped by and asked you, "Follow me."? In true Episcopal tradition I will add that Jesus is always showing up and asking us again and again to follow him, especially when we get off track. But I want us to think about the first time we heard the call to follow. The first time we heard Jesus' call, and did something ridiculous like leaving a career of fishing to follow a man from the small town of Nazareth. Can you remember a time when you altered your path, walked away from what you were doing, or began a whole new focus just because Jesus called out to you, "Follow me."?

When I was in my senior year in college I got involved with the Christian Education Committee at St. Anne's Episcopal Church. Half of the draw for me was the wonderful group of people who made up that committee, and the other half was my love for education. As the year passed we set the foundations for beginning a dynamic new youth program. I was inspired by the program, the theology was sound, and I had been to a few of the trainings. One evening in the spring of 1996, I sat in Ginny Ricketts' living room at a monthly meeting and as the group planned for the future, I thought to myself, "It is too bad that I won't be here to see this youth program begin in the fall." I thought this because I was graduating in May and even though I had no firm plans for the future, I assumed I would return to Florida or apply to grad school or do something career oriented and worthy of my diploma. Then, as clearly as if Jesus was speaking in my ear, a strange thought came into my head, "You could stay here after graduation and help this youth program begin in the fall." Who does that? What a bizarre way to live! Clearly, I didn't know any clergy. Choosing where to live because of a church had never before occurred to me. Once I heard the voice, I could imagine following Jesus instead of following my own ambitions, I dropped my nets and set off in a new direction. I had a hard time explaining to friends and family why I was staying in Annapolis. My parents kept asking, "Do you have a job? Volunteering and the church is not a job. Why are you staying there?" Somewhere in the core of my being, I knew I was staying so I could follow Jesus. And I did get a few jobs.

Jesus calls to each of us in a way unique to our own life and gifts. Maybe Jesus called to you through your family. Maybe Jesus called to you through the needs of those who are suffering. Maybe Jesus called to you through the use of your gifts and abilities. Maybe you are still waiting to hear his voice? I believe that Jesus is just waiting for the right moment when you are ready to hear his voice. When you are open, he will invite you to drop everything and follow him. Jesus waits for the moment when we are vulnerable to a new way of living, a way of following, a way of discipleship, and then he invites us in.

I must warn you, when Jesus calls you to follow him it is only the beginning of the journey. This is why our faith stories are so long and complicated. After Andrew, Simon, James and John left their boats, they were called by Jesus again and again in to an more intimate and more life changing relationship with him. Simon got called a new name, Peter. They were all called to teach and heal in Jesus' name. They were called to feed 5,000 on a hill side. They were called to share a final supper with their closest friend. They were called to let Jesus go to death on the cross. And they were called to spread the Gospel after Jesus' resurrection. The call to follow Jesus is always bringing us closer to him and to the God who sent him. The path is like a spiral that may seem to point us in many directions as we walk around the circle, but ultimately we are being drawn towards the center and heart of Christ.

Tell each other your faith stories. When did Jesus call you to follow him? What changed in your life? How did Jesus call you again and again? Does it get easier to hear his voice? We are all disciples who have been called in one way or another by the same Lord. Do not be afraid to speak about your relationship with Jesus. Because when you do, you will plant the roots of trust, respect, and love. You will strengthen the Body of Christ in this place by sharing your stories of being called by Jesus, "Follow me."

Amen.