

Sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
on Sunday January 24, 2021 by The Rev. Catherine Somerville
Text: Mark 1: 14-20

Three months ago, our Ministry and Personnel Committee came up with an idea on how Dave and I might be able to share some of the workload. I offered to lead one service each month and that gift of time would allow Dave to pursue the things that are making him curious. He has eight hours per month to visit the downtown agencies, ask questions, dream dreams, and deepen his connections with the congregation. I get the opportunity to hone my worship leadership skills, which is going to be needed as I move forward.

And wouldn't you know... how God amazes and delights, and I am sure that with a smile on our Maker's lips, I was handed the set lectionary reading for this Sunday which is about call. It seems almost too close to home, with the news that I shared with you last week that I am leaving my ministry here in two months time and setting sail for other seas. (I'm not really going that far though. During a pandemic, we can't travel right now.)

Whenever I read a scripture, I like to ponder the things that are not recorded. I like to play with those questions and I wonder... for example...

Why did Jesus approach these two sets of brothers in particular? Right away, a reader, maybe more in the ancient time than today, would understand that something new is happening. We likely do not pick up on this nuance that the usual practice was for the student to approach the teacher with the ask. Then the teacher would interview carefully before deciding whether to take the inquirer on as a disciple. Only the most promising students could stay on, the ones who showed a real aptitude for theology. No self-respecting rabbi would ever have gone out to recruit his own followers... This change from the expected way of doing things is a signal that the world is about to turn.

My next curiosity was this: surely, there were other fisher people on the beach, mending nets, washing buckets, repairing tackle, and untangling the lines. Surely others were making ready for the next sail. So, why these two sets of brothers?

Had he spent a lot of time, sitting under a tree, surveying the scene, assessing each applicant for this new job, discerning who would be the best fit?

Or was it because Simon and Andrew, James and John were so capable, and their expertise was as evident as the bounty of their catch? Was it because they each worked well together, anticipating the other's next move, knowing what needed to happen for the subsequent step? Did he see their secret signals, their glances, and all the unspoken but evident ways these two sets of brothers cared for each other?

Or was he able to look into the place where the wrinkles gathered around their eyes, then to the line of their shoulders, and did he notice that they were not as happy as they once had been? Certainly, they were skilled at their jobs. But could he see below the surface, and notice, that something had changed...

Do you think he knew that when they were out at sea, doing what they did best, that there were times, when the boat crested the waves and they looked towards the shore, they wondered about what life could be like? When the boat went down into the trough

of the waves, the low point, where horizon disappears, and only sky and water are company, did they sometimes wonder about routines and familiar things?

Likely, life would have been good if they had stayed at what they knew best. Certainly, their kin would have been a whole happier. I can't help but think of Zebedee, and his astonishment, turning to question, then turning to anger, as his sons walked away from the family business. What is an old man to do now?

Do you think Jesus knew all this, this fear of rocking the boat? Do you think he knew that sometimes people settle because the future is too cloudy to see another shore? Do you think he knew that these fisher folks had dreams that woke them up every night? (For me, since I have started to think about leaving St. Andrew's, I have woken up every night at 1:52 a.m. A few nights, after I make the necessary trip down the hall and take care of things that need to be tended to, I roll back into bed and go right to sleep. But since August, there have been so long hours between 1:52 a.m. and about 3:30, when I fretted and stewed. What if? What will be? Is it time now?)

The story we are given, this minnow-sized fragment, tells us that Jesus spoke, offering an invitation, and all four of them signed on and set off for the hills. Such a strange thing to do, when you think about it more, that fisherfolk would take to the road. Surely it must have felt foreign to them, now to be dealing with dusty feet and tired legs, rather than aching arms from hauling in the nets, and deep down, wondering if things would be so much better if they could only head out to sea, with dark ocean blue as the goal.

Sometimes, we just have to follow the nudges and believe that God has this. Sometimes all we can do is say "yes".

Gospel writer Mark tells us that the four immediately left their nets. No months of sleepless nights for them. They got caught in the new nets that Jesus threw their way with passion and intensity.

For this church, St. Andrew's, named for one of those disciples, as we hear this passage, what do we wonder about? Do we wonder about the audacity of Jesus interrupting our living and then inviting us to try something new, to journey farther and deeper, to be always open to possibility? My leaving will mean changes for you and how you see yourselves as a downtown church in a diverse and complicated setting.

Commentator Herbert O'Driscoll reminds us that the real message of this scripture goes something like this: Jesus is saying, "Don't forget my vision of the kingdom of God. Don't forget that mine is the way of justice. It is my longing for the world." When Jesus comes into the life of a congregation, he asks us to make our neighbourhood more just and more caring. And if responding to this call means that some changes have to be made in the way we live as a church, then this is exactly what our Lord calls us to."

Preacher extraordinaire Barbara Brown Taylor offers this wonderful insight:

Sometimes following means letting the hired servants go and taking care of Zebedee when he gets too old to fish. Sometimes following means casting the same old nets in a new way, or for new reasons. It may mean doing something different with the fish you catch or spending the profits in a new way. It may mean reorganizing the whole fishing business so that the drifters down at the pier have work, and everyone receives a fair wage. It may mean doing less each day, so that there will be time to

watch the light play like diamonds on the water, or for us here and now, to watch the night creep slowly to our winter world. It may mean finding the time to share jokes and fishing stories, about the catch and the ones who got away.

The God who has called us can be counted on to create a people who are able to follow.

In these last weeks, as those nighttime wonderings solidified into a decision, I have found myself reading poetry. This is not something I usually do. Years ago, I was part of a spiritual direction group and one of the participants would always bring a poem to share. You can imagine my audible eyeroll (you know what that looks and sounds like!). Without pause, each time he offered up a poem, as the others in the group nodded sagely at the wisdom, I would gather up my courage, put up my hand and say, "Excuse me, I don't understand this...."

Surprisingly, poetry has become the map. This one is called Trough, by Judy Brown:

There is a trough in waves, a low spot where horizon disappears and only sky and water are our company.

And there we lose our way unless we rest, knowing the wave will bring us to its crest again.

There we may drown if we let fear hold us within its grip and shake us side to side, and leave us flailing, torn, disoriented.

But if we rest there in the trough, in silence, being with the low part of the wave, keeping our energy and noticing the shape of things, the flow, then time alone will bring us to another place where we can see horizon, see the land ahead, regain of sense of where we are, and where we need to swim.

Sources Used:

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The Word Among Us: Reflections on the Readings of the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 1, Herbert O' Driscoll, Anglican Book Centre, 1999, pages 78-79.

Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1, pages 284-289.

"Trough", Judy Brown, Leading From Within: Poetry That Sustains the Courage to Lead, Jossey-Bass, 2007.