

Sermon: January 26, 2020. Matthew 4: 12-23

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

Fritz Wendt, a German Lutheran pastor now working in the USA as a trained therapist, offers this assessment of today's reading from the 4th chapter of Matthew:

"[the ministry of Jesus] has begun, and he immediately begins recruiting staff for his work; he breaks into the ordered lives of Simon Peter and his brother Andrew and calls them into service. His simple words hit the mark: 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.'

"Unlike in our culture (where all sorts of outfits offer us an 'extreme makeover') people did not strive for identity in the culture in which Jesus issued his call: *it was what you were*. Vocation for Simon and Andrew was who they were and who their fathers had been; they were born to it. They identified with it as they did with their village and their family. It was their life.

"They did the work that would feed them and their families. They were part of the local economy, waking early, following the patterns of fish, and selling at market. It was an identity that offered sources of happiness—family and friends in the village, and children to carry their names.

"*Jesus offered a new identity* to these fishermen who had never questioned their place in life, an identity that would be about movement, a willingness to take a journey, to begin a pilgrimage, to walk with Jesus. He offered a radical makeover—with both the adventure and the risk. They would have the opportunity to form a new community; but they also had to leave behind the place, location and source of power and knowledge that defined them. When Jesus said, 'Follow me', he asked them to surrender their lives as they knew them."

Last week and this week, we hear gospel readings describing the beginnings of Jesus' ministry and as is so often the case with the gospels, the writers report the events somewhat differently. I'm never too shaken up when there are such differences—whatever each gospel writer considers the main themes of Jesus' life and enduring message will shape how they tell all of the story—but the differing details do give us different angles of intersection between the Bible story, and our story. In John's version last week, the emphasis was on meeting Jesus; in Matthew's version, which we heard today, Jesus encounters locals well suited to discipleship, and calls them to adapt the skills they already have in the service of a new realm.

This gospel reading about the call of Jesus shows up on a good day—the day of our Annual Meeting, when we review the various ways that we attempted to say "yes" to the call of Jesus in 2019, with some preliminary thoughts on how to respond to Christ's call in these early days of the year 2020. One of the reasons I like this reading on this day, is that I generally regard the word "calling" in a very individualistic way—my calling, your calling, a new person's calling—but on this Sunday, we assess our *group calling* and our group response to the urgings of Christ Jesus to engage breadth of needs and yearnings of all God's children in the Bow Valley. The aptitudes and attitudes, experiences, interests, passions and curiosities that we each bring as individuals will shape our actions, but today our focus is on our collective response, together. All of our established ministries: Worship, Pastoral Care, Healing Pathway, Outreach of various forms, Christian Education, even the physical building and what its accessibility or lack thereof says to the community...everything we do, everything covered in our Annual Report and the stuff we missed reporting, is a group response to Christ's call to discipleship, made up of our shared decisions and everyone's contributions. We celebrate the full spectrum of people, whose diverse experiences and abilities can accomplish so much when we respond together.

Another reason I like this gospel lesson of Jesus at the lakeshore as our scripture for this Sunday, is the respect that it shows for *what already was*, in serving *what could be*. Fritz Wendt is quite correct in underlining the "complete makeover" offered by Jesus; the call of Christ is a radical transformation for any congregation (or person) who listens with the heart, to what is

being asked of us. Yet there is also a recognition by Jesus of what was already being done. Jesus called these fishers, not because they were the first people he came across that day, but because they would have unique capacity for the work of travelling from village to village, sharing the good news of a new way. They were used to early mornings and long days, they went out on the water in fair weather and foul, they knew the consequences of a both the empty net and the bountiful catch, and the importance of returning to task again and again and again. They also knew the simplicity of family life, the camaraderie of community, the joy of generations gathered together. These already-existing aspects of their lives were honoured as Jesus presented them with the opportunity to “fish for people” who would accept and rejoice in his new life, a life of hope and engagement and abundance.

Similarly, it is so important to me that we understand *our* new and future callings, as an affirmation of who this congregation already is, and continuing to celebrate that as we keep moving forward. Our Affirming Vision, for example, so enthusiastically adopted this past fall, is built around the existing Mission Statement which already called us beyond ourselves. Our desire to specifically and explicitly embrace the LGBTQ community and anyone else who has ever been turned away by a Church, builds on the welcome that you have so naturally offered within these walls over the years. Our focused engagement with urgent issues facing the community around us, can be traced all the way back to 1891, when Rev. Charles Gordon and Miss Minnie Fulton and all the other first members of this congregation realized how many of the Miners here in Canmore were drinking away every last dime of their earnings down at the pub, and developed a range of activities to at least give some positive and healthy options. As we seek new ways that we hope will connect future generations with the amazing, inclusive, progressive message of Jesus Christ, we build on what we’ve done and who we are.

And a third reason why this scripture is such a helpful focal point for this Annual Meeting Sunday, is a bit at the very beginning that I hadn’t really noticed until now. Starting at verse 12, we read “When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee... From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Matthew 4: 12, 17)

I’ve always remembered the calling of the disciples as coming right after Jesus’ time of temptation and soul-searching in the wilderness, but Matthew remembers what I skipped over. Jesus was inspired, not only by his positive, expansive view of a new Kingdom or Kin-dom of God where all people, even the poorest of the poor, were loved and valued, but also by a crisis: John the Baptist had been imprisoned, and the future for John looked bleak. Jesus, then, courageously took up the task of preaching his cousin’s message of reconciliation through repentance, with the full knowledge that expressing these thoughts was dangerous.

Christ’s call, in our uncertain times in the life of the Church and, indeed, the life of this planet, requires that we have that same courage. A book that I am about two-thirds finished reading, *Canoeing the Mountains* by Tod Bolsinger, uses the Lewis & Clark expedition in the USA two hundred years ago as a metaphor for the situation presently facing mainline Protestant Churches in North America. Searching a northwest passage, Lewis & Clark could see mountain peaks ahead of them, but expected that the land on the other side of the mountains would be just like the land they had been travelling: as the plains east of the Rockies turned into foothills and then mountains, they figured that the west face of the Rocky Mountains would quickly give way to foothills and then an expansive plain leading gently toward the Pacific. As we can picture, living where we live, this is not how the topography out here actually works.

Tod Bolsinger suggests that this is much like the journey the Church is on in these days: we’re clambering up one side of the mountains, aware that *something* exists on the other side, but we really don’t know what. If we rely too much on what we already know, expecting that the far side of the mountains will look exactly like land we’ve been travelling, and that the skills that

have brought us this far are the same skillset we will need for the next stage of the journey, we're in for trouble. But if we stay nimble and don't lose courage in the changing, unfamiliar landscape ahead of us, and if we can keep adapting as we go, our journey has a greater chance of succeeding - or at the very least, continuing. And although the role of Indigenous guides in the Lewis & Clark journey hasn't been developed too deeply in Bolsinger's book (at least in the part I have read so far!), it does seem that the expedition went a lot better when the wisdom of the people Indigenous to the region was taken into account.

Given that mainline Churches in Canada as a whole have been in statistical decline since 1964, a readiness to try different things isn't a bad idea. Our words, actions, forms of gathering, *including some things that are beloved to us*, may well need to change as we seek life and vitality for this congregation in a future we cannot yet see. A willingness to experiment, and fail, and learn, and experiment again, will be essential, as will the wisdom to listen to those things that the next generations already consider important and non-negotiable. Even as we celebrate the present vitality of this congregation, and attempt to build on our innate desire to welcome and include and adapt, we humbly admit that we have a lot to learn as we seek ways for the good news of Jesus Christ to make a difference to new hearts.

With thanksgiving and an *appropriate* amount of pride, I celebrate another year spent in ministry with you, and the bold steps to which we have committed ourselves. In that which we already know, in that which we will learn, in the times when we frankly will not know which way is the best way and may need to experiment and fail and try again many times, may the loving intentions and purposes of Christ Jesus, crucified and risen, always inspire us in our journey forward. Amen.

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