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Scripture: Matthew 4:12-23

## Come and Follow

As I was on the way to a meeting with other pastors on Wednesday, I wondered how I could explain to the group the way I've been feeling lately. During the past month, I've described my mental state as feeling kind of blue. I'm usually a rather optimistic person, but I've been experiencing more sadness and hopelessness than is normal for me. I attributed it to the holiday blues – not being with family for Christmas and also wishing I had a spouse, children, and grandchildren to celebrate with.

But as I arrived at my destination, it dawned on me that there were other factors in the mix. The book I'd been listening to on the drive was about sexual abuse – the long-lasting effect it has on its survivors and the great lengths people and institutions will go to deny and cover-up its existence. The book on the seat beside me was about addiction – how classism, racism, and greed feed it and obstruct efforts to address its root causes. The news I'd listened to throughout the week included reports of impeachment, partisan politics, escalating tensions around the world, widespread brushfires, and the hottest decade ever recorded. The movie I saw last Sunday was about black men wrongly accused, convicted, and spending many years on death row – and about people in law enforcement and the justice system who don't care about truth as long as someone is convicted and executed. A play I saw last week was about depression and suicide. In the class I'm teaching on Thursday nights we're talking about how our economy is stacked against people living near or below the poverty line – and, specifically, about what it's like to be poor and living in Salina.

It's overwhelming! And I'm one of the fortunate ones. My life hasn't been touched directly by most of the items I just named. What right do I have to be blue?

One response would be to put all those things out of my mind and decide never to read or listen to any bad news ever again. But that's not a responsible choice; it's not a Christ like response; it's not a life-giving response for me or those who are most affected by the issues I just listed. A better response includes looking for ways to address one or more of these situations using my particular set of resources – the time, talent, money, and energy that I possess. It also includes looking for signs of hope.

For me, I find hope in Jesus – in trying to follow his teaching and his example. I want to continue on with a choice I made many years ago, to accept Jesus' invitation to come and follow. So this morning we'll revisit the first time Jesus issued that invitation. And we'll think about change. How Jesus' life changed from this point on. How the disciples' lives changed. How our lives change when we chose to follow Jesus. And, hopefully, how our decision to follow Jesus might affect change in the world around us.

Our scripture is Matthew's account of the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. After Jesus was baptized by John, he went through a time of testing. Now he's ready to get on with his ministry – the work he was sent to Earth to do.

Matthew states Jesus withdrew to Galilee when he heard John had been arrested. Why didn't he stay in Judea where he had come to be baptized by John? Bethlehem is in Judea –

that's where Jesus was born. Jerusalem is in Judea – that's where the temple is, the center of Jewish religious life, the most holy place for the Jews.

Was Jesus concerned for his own safety? Matthew kind of makes it sound that way. John is arrested and Jesus leaves the area. He puts some physical distance between him and the place where John has been preaching – the current hot spot for Jews to be hassled.

However, Mark states that Jesus “came” to Galilee; Luke says he “returned” to Galilee; and John reports he “decided to go” to Galilee. Maybe fear of arrest wasn't the greatest motivating factor in Jesus' decision. (Of course, different translations of the Bible use different words even in Matthew's account, so we shouldn't decide Jesus' motives on that word alone.)

Perhaps Jesus wanted to distance himself from John in another way. Maybe he wanted to avoid having his ministry viewed as merely a continuation of John's ministry.

Or maybe this was a strategic move in other ways. John's imprisonment was a natural turning point that provided Jesus with an opportunity to begin his own separate work. So a logical question would be one concerning location. Where should this work begin?

Jesus' hometown was Nazareth which is in Galilee. He'd been born in Bethlehem in Judea because his parents were required by the government to go there. He spent part of his toddlerhood in Egypt because Herod was killing any potential rivals. His parents returned to Nazareth when it was safe. Galilee is his home and he returns there.

However, he passes through his hometown of Nazareth and moves to Capernaum by the sea. This would be a more prominent place than Nazareth. It was a busy and prosperous community. Because it lay near a political border, it had a tax office or customs station and also served as an outpost for a detachment of Herod's troops.<sup>1</sup> (So much for the theory that he was moving out of Herod's reach.)

Capernaum was the largest town on the Sea of Galilee, and had the largest harbor. Boats came and went regularly, plying their trade – and also spreading news. It would have been an excellent "communications center." News could travel swiftly from Capernaum throughout the entire region. This is a good choice of location in which to begin a new venture.

Matthew interprets Jesus' move to Galilee as a fulfillment of prophecy. Remember that each of the four gospel accounts – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – was written by a particular person at a particular time for a particular audience. Each of the writers emphasizes different things when telling the story of Jesus' life and ministry. It appears that Matthew's main purpose is to demonstrate to his Jewish readers that Jesus is their Messiah. He frequently quotes the Old Testament to demonstrate how Jesus fulfills what has been predicted. According to Matthew, Jesus' move to Capernaum is to fulfill prophecy.

The words recited in Matthew 4:15-16 come from Isaiah 9:1-2. For Matthew, the phrase *the people who sat in darkness* describes a people who have yet to discover a right relationship with God. Life in Galilee, however, is about to change. With Jesus beginning his ministry, *light has dawned* on those who live in darkness. The recipients of light are first and foremost the Jewish crowds who flock to Jesus during his ministry. However, the fact that Galilee is a *land of the Gentiles*, hints at a wider circle of darkness to which Jesus will bring light.<sup>2</sup>

Verse 17 summarizes Jesus' message. This message is positive: Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. It's not negative: Repent, so you won't go to hell. It's a call for a response to God's action. God is making a new world. Get a new sense of direction and purpose and become part of that new world. Repentance isn't only about remorse but, more importantly,

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<sup>1</sup> Richard B. Gardner, *Matthew, Believers Church Bible Commentary*, Herald Press, 1991, p. 76.

<sup>2</sup> Gardner, p. 76.

about a change of direction.<sup>3</sup> Jesus calls everyone to repent. A smaller circle of persons receives the call to follow me.

In the next section of this passage from Matthew, Jesus invites two sets of brothers whose trade is fishing to leave their steady jobs and family ties and join him on his journey. These men are at the lower end of the socio-economic ladder. Their work is dirty and physically challenging. It demands their attention from sunup to sundown. Jesus doesn't seem to be bothered by their grimy fingernails, their wet and dirty clothing, not even by their low social status or lack of political power. These are utterly ordinary people called to be part of an extraordinary ministry. Jesus calls them as they are, from where they are, being who they are.

Jesus takes the initiative; he seeks out these men in the midst of their work. His call to them is both a command and a promise. The command is to follow. The promise is they will learn how to fish for people.<sup>4</sup> It's unlikely they completely understand what fishing for people means, yet they follow, seemingly without hesitation – the ultimate snap decision.

However, maybe these snap decisions aren't as quick as we think. Every decision takes place in a context. In all four gospels, people make what looks like a snap decision to become disciples of Jesus. But things look a little different when we look at their decision in the flow of that particular gospel's story. Then it looks like the snap decision may have been one step in an ongoing process. It seems likely that the fishermen have been thinking about Jesus for a while and about what the impact of following him might be. They are primed and ready to respond positively to Jesus' invitation.

The last section of this story provides a summary of Jesus' travels and the nature of his ministry. According to Matthew, Jesus traveled all over Galilee and became so famous that he attracted crowds from the surrounding areas. Jesus taught in the synagogues, preached the good news, and healed people with all kinds of disease or affliction. His ministry was a well-rounded ministry. His ministry was one of restoration – restoring people to physical, mental, and spiritual health.

This section helps to demonstrate the great changes that Jesus' ministry brought. The crowds of people who came to Jesus were changed. I wonder what difference this encounter made in their lives when they returned home. And what influence these changes had on their families and neighbors. Peter, Andrew, James, and John were changed. They had a completely different lifestyle from what they had before they met Jesus. And Jesus' life changed. He had spent 30 years in relative obscurity and now, all of sudden, he was pressed in on every side by people in need. This was his calling, but even for Jesus, it wasn't easy.

I remember the first time I heard the song *Will You Come and Follow Me* by John Bell and Graham Maule. Its impact on me was so great that I wasn't even able to sing it that day. All I could do was sit and listen.

It was an ordinary day during my time at seminary in Indiana. I'd been working in the bookstore that morning and was late to chapel. When I arrived, they had just begun to sing.

*Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?  
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?  
Will you let my love be shown, will you let my name be known,  
will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?*

This was near the end of my seminary studies. My snap decision to answer the call to ministry had taken more than twenty years. Now, I had begun the process of looking for a

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<sup>3</sup> Douglas E. Wingeier, *Keeping Holy Time: Year A*, Abingdon Press, 2001, p. 73.

<sup>4</sup> Wingeier, p. 73.

church. I was sure of my call to the ministry, but uncertain about where that would be. Would following God take me to Illinois or Indiana, or maybe to Pennsylvania?

*Will you love the “you” you hide if I but call your name?*

*Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same?*

*Will you use the faith you’ve found to reshape the world around,  
through my sight and touch and sound in you and you in me?*

This verse hit me deep in the core of my being. As I looked around at my seminary classmates I saw people who had talents I wished I had. Why wasn’t I more like Matt or Suella or Alan or Samantha? Would the church where I ended up be shortchanged?

*Lord, your summons echoes true when you but call my name.*

*Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.*

*In your company I’ll go where your love and footsteps show.*

*Thus I’ll move and live and grow in you and you in me.*

This verse gave me some reassurance. Following means more than traveling to a new place and doing a new thing. It means learning from, responding to, imitating, being loyal to, abiding in. I could trust that if I followed Jesus to the best of my ability, I could live and grow and make a difference.

Of course, we know how the story ends – or, I should say, continues. I’m not yet to the end of my story. Following God’s call didn’t take me to Illinois or Indiana or even to Pennsylvania. It took me to Kansas. And for the last ten years we’ve been following Jesus together. Ordinary people called to be part of an extraordinary ministry. Called as we are, from where we are, being who we are.

At that chapel service more than a decade ago, we didn’t sing the additional two verses printed in tiny letters at the bottom of the page.

*Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?*

*Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?*

*Will you risk the hostile stare should your life attract or scare?*

*Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?*

*Will you let the blinded see if I but call your name?*

*Will you set the prisoners free and never be the same?*

*Will you kiss the leper clean, and do such as this unseen,  
and admit to what I mean in you and you in me?*

Perhaps these are the words I most need to take to heart as I consider the sources of grief, discouragement, and hopelessness I listed at the beginning this sermon. How boldly do I admit to what following Jesus means for me? What have I done to care for cruel ... and for kind? I’ve done some things that have made a difference, but most are relatively safe. What, if anything, have I risked when following Jesus?

This song and this story from Matthew challenge me to continue looking for ways to use my particular set of resources – the time, talent, money, and energy that I possess – in a way that contributes to God’s ministry of restoration. The knowledge that there are others in this room and around this world doing the same gives me hope. Let’s continue to follow Jesus together.