

With What You Have

Texts:

Matthew 4:12-23

A sermon preached by
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Now 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.



I wonder. Were these really the first guys Jesus called to be disciples? The brothers, Peter and Andrew. And then the Zebedee brothers, James and John. Four fishermen from Capernaum.

What if the first guy's name was really, say, Dave? Disciple Dave. But he really wasn't interested.

“Hey, Dave, wanna leave that pot washing job and follow me?”

“Um, no thanks, Jesus. I think I'll hang out here with my peeps.”

“But, Dave, there's so much more out there. We'll go to Nazareth, to gentile country across the sea, to Cana, to Bethany. And of course, we'll go to Jerusalem. It'll be great!”

“Nah. I'm cool here. I'm getting promoted to fish cleaner next month. Try Peter – he's crazy enough to try something new like that.”

I suspect Jesus didn't walk around picking particular people that he knew ahead of time were predisposed to his way of thinking or that God had handpicked these particular people for his disciples. I don't think so. I think Jesus worked with whatever – with whoever – he ended up with. So why are we surprised that we have to do the same?

Rev. Alyce Mackenzie wrote about attending a lecture by Erik Larson, author of *The Devil in the White City* and *In the Garden of the Beasts*. “It was held at a large downtown church and the place was filled. He told of how his readership had taken time to develop. When he wrote his first book, his publicist set up a book tour of major cities. In one venue, he walked into the auditorium and took his place at the podium up front, only to find, as he peered out into the cavernous room, that there was only one person present. One woman sat in the back row. He smiled at her and said, ‘It's good to see you this evening. Why don't you move up here closer to the front?’ She replied, ‘No, I'll stay put. I might want to leave early.’”

We have to do with whoever is in front of us. Whoever walks through those doors on Sunday morning – that's who we are – that's who Jesus accepts! Whoever walks through our Lobby doors any day of the week – that's who we are called to be – that's who Jesus calls us to be!

For Matthew, Jesus sets up his home base for ministry in Capernaum, in Galilee, not a glamorous place to be 2,000 years ago. It is the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, the same as in the Isaiah reading this morning. It is a place to which, according to

Isaiah, God had brought contempt – it is the first two of the northern kingdoms that were deported when Assyria invaded in 721 B.C.E. These are the lost and forgotten of the Jewish people. Two of the tribes of Israel, they were leaders in the conquest of Caanan and the securing of that region as the Promised Land. But then they were the first conquered by outsiders and sent away into captivity.

But, says Matthew who is always trying to tie things together to fulfill prophesy, the Messiah comes from there, from this place of the lost and forgotten. The Messiah will focus on the lost and forgotten among the Jewish people. But then Matthew also wants us to know that this long-awaited Messiah will come from the Galilee, a place well-known for its mix of different peoples, different ethnicities, different nationalities. "Galilee of the nations" says Isaiah; "Galilee of the Gentiles," writes Matthew. At the very beginning of his ministry, Matthew's Jesus anticipates the expansion of the mission to all the nations, not just Israel.

Those who respond willingly to Jesus' call to be disciples – students of the teacher, followers of a new way – have to be prepared to be fully and completely in. This will be no glamorous trip to the Temple in Jerusalem to study and debate scripture. This will be an arduous journey that will encounter and touch and heal the least and lost of the world. These disciples, says Matthew, will be reflectors of God's Light to "those who sat in the region and shadow of death." Some fun, eh?

Who would you pick for a challenging mission like this? First, I don't think I'd go looking in a place like Capernaum. Most of the people in Jesus' day probably had never heard of this town which sits on the edge of the Sea of Galilee with at that time about 1,000 inhabitants, mostly fishermen and farmers – subsistence laborers just trying to get by and feed their families. This is not a center of power or commerce or influence or...pretty much anything. And when *I* am *finally* named Messiah, I'll be kicking-off *my* campaign with a team of organizers who know their way around the law, who know how to market a product like I have to offer,

who can read the polls and tell me which way the wind is blowing so I can bend that way. I want the cast from *The West Wing* to lead my messianic campaign.

But not Jesus. Nope. He gets fishermen who probably can't read or write, who have never left this little backwater place on the map, who have no money, who have no clue about organization and imaging and statistical analysis. What is this all about? Did Jesus choose these particular people? Did God pick out this team ahead of time? Not hardly. But these are the ones who are willing and committed, these are the 4 who said yes to this most desperate of missions, these are who Jesus had to work with.

Not a bad message for the church today is it? We don't get to pick and choose who's in and who's out. We only get to reflect the light into a world that needs that message now as much as it did then.

As an institution we want the people with money and power who can bring prestige to *our* church – notice how we call it *our* church. We want people already committed to Jesus who don't really need anything and are willing to give everything. We want the perfect and the beautiful, not the lost and forgotten. But the truth of God's message is that as the church – simply as human beings, in fact – we don't get to choose like that. We who are already in the boat don't get to choose who will become additional followers of Jesus, we simply get the privilege of opening it up so that all are welcome to see the glow and feel the warmth of the light that shines in even the darkest of worlds. That's powerful. Numbers go up, numbers go down; people come in, people go out; some are experts in their fields, some are simply trying to get by. The church has to do with who it has.

So also do we. We get pretty picky when it comes to who we let into our personal inner circles. The cliques of high school often turn into the exclusive societies of college years and the country clubs of adulthood. We believe we can pick and choose our way to success and prosperity. We don't get to choose our families so

we're determined that we will decide who we're going to have in our tribe.

But, says Matthew, that's not really how God works. You don't get to pick and choose who will be allowed to receive the message of this powerful reign of God. God's empire is open to all – even simple fisher folk from Galilee. And you know what? You might even have to leave your family to respond to that call. So Andrew and Peter, James and John left it all behind and wandered the world with Jesus.

The values of the world mean nothing when it comes to the light that shines in the darkness. The values that say family first are meaningless. I was in a store recently where a sign hung above the cash register – it read *sempre famiglia* or “always family,” meaning that family takes priority over everything and everyone else. But that's just a tempting slogan. A nice thought, perhaps, but certainly not the Jesus message and not God's intention for us.

You see, we who want to call ourselves disciples, followers, are called away from the known into which we are born and into the unknown which we don't choose but we encounter along the way.

Did Andrew and Peter and James and John – or Jesus for that matter – want to be connected to people like Zacheaus the little tax collector or the woman with seven demons or the lepers who wanted to be touched or the Gentiles who were unclean simply because of who they were? I doubt it. That's not really a way to run a successful campaign. But it is who they encounter along the way and it is who God wants us to love.

Work and family were – and still are – crucial for survival but Jesus' challenge sets these priorities aside. There is something great, more fundamental, than family and the local economy, says God. To challenge these is to take a real risk, but for many people, real growth will never happen until they can make such a move. The same applies to the church today – local conditions and loyalties can replace the message of God's reign being among us now and so we get drawn to what and who we want rather than

who we have. Jesus' message is a radical agenda which challenges us to call into question the dominant values of that which gives us comfort – family and home. Responding to the call to discipleship places at risk those loyalties.

Hope Church has a Vision Team which has just started its work. Our task is to take a comprehensive look at our congregation and our mission and vision and figure out who we are and who we are called to be. We met in November and December and are about to meet again next weekend with our agenda set to be together for a longer retreat in the next few weeks. Our hope is that we can recommend a new vision for Hope as it continues to grow into the future.

I am always intrigued by these kinds of processes because we quickly realize that searching for a vision really has little to do with how we see the future and has everything to do with how God sees our future. The single sentence prayer that will guide us – and I will begin using this more often and in more prominent ways for all of us is this:

***God, how do you want to express yourself through
this church in this community at this time?***

Not some other perfect church in some other “good old days” time in some utopian fantasy community. But this church in this time in this community. We have to be God's church with what and who we have.

***God, how do you want to express yourself through
this church in this community at this time?***

It fits completely with this scripture, the call of the disciples, the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It explains why we have to be the church with who and what we have. God does not allow us to choose who comes in, who answers that call, who becomes us. God does not let us choose. But neither does God choose for us --- there is no predestination involved here, it's not that some people

are already set apart as the called ones while others are fated to be always in darkness.

You see, God's reign simply is. Who responds is who responds. And if we are truly the disciples that continue to proclaim that message voiced by Jesus 2,000 years ago then we are open to the changes and the flexibility that accompanies it.

Over the course of this year, you will hear that prayer over and over again. Pray it with me now: ***God, how do you want to express yourself through this church in this community at this time?***

And you will hear from your Vision Team. It will be listening and watching and discerning from within our midst. How is God wanting to express God's self in this community at this time? We don't know. We will pray that we can be open enough to find out. My prayer is that we will go forward responding to whatever that call is on or lives and that we will be open to whatever it is that we have in front of us – the lost and found, the remembered and forgotten, the least and the best, the young and old, rich and poor, the decided and the questioners.

We, as disciples, have to be with who and what we have. With God's help so we can be faithful disciples.

Amen.