

Sermon for Sunday, January 22, 2017  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

It was hardly the way  
they expected him to begin.  
Fresh from baptism in the Jordan  
then the best part of six weeks  
in the canyons and crevices of the nearby desert hills,  
he had returned home to Nazareth  
when the news came to him  
that Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great  
whose fear and aggression  
had shaped Jesus' early years,  
forcing his family into exile,  
Herod Antipas  
had arrested his cousin John  
and taken him prisoner.

And Jesus  
went from Nazareth  
to the northern end  
of the Sea of Galilee,  
close to where  
the headwaters of the Jordan  
entered it,  
close to the border of the territory  
of a different ruler,  
perhaps because from there  
he could easily escape  
if Herod Antipas  
decided  
to try to arrest him as well.

But whatever the reason,  
it was there, by the Sea of Galilee  
that Jesus began his work,  
there that he began to gather  
the first  
of his disciples.

It was probably  
an ordinary day for the brothers  
Simon, and Andrew.  
they'd been up since before dawn,  
heading out on their boat  
in the predawn stillness,  
the only sound  
the quiet splashing of oars  
and rippling of nets as they threw them out  
and a gentle swish as they pulled them in  
heavy with fish.  
Then hauling them into the boat,  
sorting the fish  
throwing the smallest ones back  
and keeping the rest.  
And then throwing the nets out again,  
and again,  
and again.  
It was hard work.

And then they heard his voice.  
And pulled in  
close to shore,  
and we don't know exactly  
what he said to them,  
but by the time the fateful words were spoken  
they were already  
half out of their boat,  
and dropping their nets,  
and without a backward glance,  
they turned  
to follow him.

But they weren't the only ones.  
James and John  
had done with fishing for the day.  
But their work wasn't done.  
Some of their nets  
had been strained beyond their capacity,

the fibers fraying thin  
and in places pulled into holes.  
And so they sat in their boat, pulled up on the shore  
their father with a lifetimes experience  
supervising  
as they  
carefully knotted in  
new pieces of rope.

We assume the conversation  
went much the same as it did  
with Simon and Andrew,  
and ended much the same way.  
James and John  
dropped their half mended nets,  
climbed out of their boat  
and went with Jesus.  
“Follow me,” Jesus said.

And that’s exactly  
what they did.  
They walked away from their nets,  
their boat,  
their father,  
and went with Jesus.

It’s hard to imagine, isn’t it?  
Leaving your job  
on a moment’s notice,  
and not just the job  
but all the tools of your trade as well,  
abandoning your family,  
and heading off into  
an uncertain future  
on the say so  
of someone  
you’d barely, if ever, met before.

It says something, doesn’t it,  
about how amazing Jesus

must have been.  
People would hear his voice  
and abandon their whole lives,  
everything that was important to them before,  
just to follow him.

If anyone were to do that today  
we'd think they were crazy.  
Assume they'd been hooked into some kind of cult,  
or had some sort of mental health issue  
or been on drugs.

And yes, that has happened,  
and not so long ago.  
We think of Jim Jones and drinking Koolaid,  
and Daved Koresh and the Branch Davidians in Waco,  
and many others.

But in fact, Jesus' call to follow him  
was nothing new.  
Because it built on the faith of his forebears, the faith of the people of God  
from the time of Moses.  
That's the importance in our reading today  
of the references back to the prophet Isaiah.

Jesus' actions  
were always  
part of the plan.  
He was simply doing  
what God had planned all along.  
Remember the first commandment?

God said, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the  
house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me."  
In other words,  
nothing  
is to come between us  
and God.  
Nothing

And it comes up time and time again in Jesus' teaching.

"You can't serve two masters.

You can't serve God and wealth."

"Let the dead bury their own dead."

"Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple."

"Render to Caesar what is caesar's  
and to God  
what is God's."

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength."

"Follow me,"  
said Jesus to Simon and Andrew and James and John.

"Follow me."

And they did.

Two simple words,  
and it changed  
their lives.

Jesus's call is uncompromising.

We might try to soften it,  
but he is clear.

Our allegiance,  
first and foremost,  
our allegiance  
is to God.

And that is a difficult thing to hear  
in our time and place.

Because we have stood in the schoolyard  
and pledged allegiance to the flag,  
and in a century  
where terror has come far too close,  
we have pledged allegiance to our country,  
and we live in a culture,

where family is one of the highest values,  
and where being able to support yourself financially,  
and even better,  
to improve your situation,  
is regarded as the norm.

But Jesus says no.  
Our first allegiance  
is to God.  
And only then, only then,  
do family, and country, and wealth  
come into it.

Jesus' call to follow him  
is uncompromising.  
His call is all consuming.

It's a demand  
of total allegiance.

If we call ourselves Christians,  
followers of Jesus,  
then nothing, nothing  
is to get in the way  
of God.  
Nothing.

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I was going to end the sermon there - the shortest sermon I've ever preached on a regular Sunday.  
But then I realized  
that that is only half the story.  
Because I suspect that most of us,  
when we hear that call,  
are like the rich young man  
who went away from Jesus sad  
because it was all just too hard.  
Perhaps  
if he'd stayed a little longer,

heard and seen  
more of what Jesus had to offer  
he might have given it a try.

Because if we stay  
through the next verse,  
even better if we stay through the end of the chapter,  
we hear this:

“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. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.”

Following Jesus  
wasn't just about leaving things behind.  
It was about entering a new and wonderful life.  
These fishermen  
had spent their lives in a small town  
doing hard work.  
But when they responded to him  
they found themselves  
traveling across the region,  
seeing miracles  
they would never have dreamed possible,  
being part of a movement  
that stretched throughout all the regions of their country,  
people coming from everywhere  
to meet this Jesus.

And when he left them, after his death and resurrection and ascension  
they became  
the leaders of this movement,  
filled with the Holy Spirit,  
sent to bring good news across the region,  
discovering and rediscovering the grace of God  
all around them,  
experiencing  
God's blessing.

And it's still true.  
It's still true.  
Taking that risk.  
Responding to Jesus' call to follow him.  
Putting God first in every part of your life,  
it's still something  
that can take us places we never dreamed of.  
It's still something  
where we can know the grace of God.  
It's still something  
where we are blessed.

Jesus said,  
Jesus still says,  
"Follow  
me."