

“Welcome to This Ministry”

Matthew 4:12-23

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A popular question asked in job interviews is:

***“What would you do the first day of work,
if we were to choose you for this position?”***

This story from Matthew’s gospel tells us how Jesus – *God’s choice* – started his ministry. He had just been told that John – the one who had baptized him – was in jail.¹ He had moved to the seaside town of Capernaum, which had been a haven for Gentiles long ago.

Notice that Jesus did not start off with a soft and gentle message. He did not ease in slowly as the Great Light to those living in the shadow of death.² He could have kicked off his ministry talking about love or forgiveness or grace. But no, his first message was this:

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

In other words: turn around. Change directions from the way you’ve been living. Reorient your whole life, because God’s way is at hand.

In other words – yes there are oppressive powers in the world, yes there are foolish leaders (in Jesus’ case Herod Antipas). But don’t just expect God to come sweeping in to turn the world on its head. First *you* need to change directions.

This was the context in which Jesus started his ministry. It starts with making a serious change.

Jesus started with four fishermen – two sets of brothers: Peter and Andrew, and then James and John. The first set of brothers he met while they were casting their nets into the Sea of Galilee as he was walking by. The second set of brothers he met while they were with their father mending nets in the boat.

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Most people who fish today – at least in this country - do it for sport. It’s what men and women do to relax, kick back and enjoy nature.

¹ John was imprisoned at Herod’s palace in Macherus, Jordan. See:
<http://www.archart.it/archart/asia/Giordania/Macherus/image1.html>

² The words for “shadow of death” (vs.16 & in Psalm 23) and “deep darkness” in Isaiah 9) are the same in Greek.

But in the first century, this was no hobby for Peter and Andrew, James and John. In fact, chances are that they didn't even own their boats.³ And even if they did own their boats, the taxes they paid to the Roman authorities kept them poor and Herod rich.⁴ No wonder they dropped their nets so quickly. No wonder they wanted a change.

There was something about Jesus that implied that he would be a different kind of boss. Here was a charismatic young man – 30 years old⁵ – who approached potential followers talking with them in terms they would understand.

Jesus was a carpenter – but he didn't approach the fishermen and start up a conversation about olive wood versus cedar. He spoke in fishing terms:

“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

Fishing for fish was grueling work to feed your family.
Fishing for people was invigorating work to feed your soul.

Fishing for fish involved baiting them, filleting them.
Fishing for people involves feeding them spiritually.

Fishing for fish involves destroying them.
Fishing for people involves giving life, making relationships.

This is the work Jesus did. This is the work Jesus calls us to do.

What the church does best - and what the church does worst – is make relationships. It's very possible to be a part of a church community for most of our life and not really know the other people in our congregation. Yes, maybe we say “hello” or we work on a project together in church. Maybe we know something about their extended family when their parents or children come into town.

But it's possible that we don't really know *what they are praying for, what they worry about, what makes them overjoyed*. We don't know them on a deeper, more spiritual level unless we've had the peculiar privilege to love them through a family tragedy or to sit with them in times of grief or anxiety.

For generations, the professional pastor has been the one person who got this role in the church. I have the most extraordinary job in that I am often called to share in the milestones of people's lives. But we have gotten away from what Jesus intends for the whole church.

³ The Greek literally reads “the boat” instead of “their boat” as opposed to “their nets” which implies that the boats did not belong to them.

⁴ This was Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great.

⁵ Luke 3:23

I am not the only minister here. You are also in this ministry. In fact – have you noticed that when we ordain new officers, when we introduce new members, even when we baptize babies we say:

Welcome to this ministry.

Being a part of the church means that we are Christ to each other. Just as Jesus fished for Peter and Andrew and James and John, they were called not only to follow Jesus but to fish for people. Jesus would show them how.

Jesus would touch the hurting and listen to the desperate. He would love the unlovable and connect with foreigners. And this ministry was not just *his* responsibility. He was calling others to make these connections too.

Following Jesus is no more about sitting in a pew that it's about sitting in a boat. Following Jesus is about getting out of the boat, getting out of the pew and “fishing for people.” And just as Jesus made his first four disciples “fishers of people” in our 21st Century parlance, maybe Jesus would call us:

In the business of people (for those of us who are in business)

OR

Builders of people (for those in construction)

OR

Investors in people (for those in banking).

In other words - whatever it is we do for our life's work - we are to drop our proverbial nets and alter the way we serve. Peter, Andrew, James, and John fished for people. Maybe your work involves conveying information or solving problems or organizing projects. But in the midst of these duties – whatever they are - there are people you will meet who are living in darkness. And you have the power – through Christ – to bring light.

People gather here every Sunday also seeking light. And you'd think that – as a church – we would be excellent at sharing that light with each other. But often churches get bogged down in conveying information or solving problems or organizing projects.

Those things might be important. But if we really want to follow Jesus, we will notice that – whatever we are doing in this building and outside this building – it is first and foremost about creating relationships, knowing each other so that we might love and serve each other in the name of Christ.

It's not about the fish.

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Long ago, when they were boys, our grandfather taught my brothers to fish. My grandfather loved to fish and he was very good at it. And when he taught my brothers, it must

have been very frustrating because they would fidget and talk too much and bop each other in the head with the fishing poles. But my grandfather didn't seem to mind. Those lessons were never about the fish. It was about a grandfather who wanted to spend time with his grandsons.

My father-in-law used to take my husband out to fish early, early in the morning. And my husband – as a young boy – never liked it. He couldn't figure out why in the world they didn't just go to the market and buy some fish if his father wanted fish so badly. But it wasn't about the fish for my father-in-law. It was about building a relationship with his son – all alone together in the pre-dawn hours in a boat.

We in the church busy ourselves with many things. We have programs to run and classes to teach and mission trips to take and the administrivia of life in any organization. But church is not about these things – or if it is for us, then we are “missing the boat.” Church is about the community of faith, turning from our old way of life together to a new way, following Jesus to place where Jesus is leading us, wherever that might be.

It's not about the fish at all. It's about the people with whom we serve, the people we love in the name of Jesus.

Welcome to this ministry.