

3 Epiphany, Year A

Isaiah 9:1-4

Psalm 27:1,5-13

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Matthew 4:12-23

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the 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." From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." As 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. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As 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. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. 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.

Matthew 4:12-23

At this point you've heard me say more than once that we are now in the season of Epiphany, the span of time that exists between the end of Christmas and the beginning of Lent. It is the season in which we focus most intently on the beginning of Jesus' ministry. You can always tell when Epiphany has arrived because we take on the color green in our vestments and altar hangings. Green is the color of growth: the growth of God's kingdom, the growth of Jesus' ministry, and the growth of our own spirits and souls.

You have also heard me say that Epiphany is the season of miracles. Typically the Gospel lessons in Epiphany are chock full of the many miracles that reveal the divinity of Jesus. But what about today? Here we are, still in the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and we find him walking down by the Sea of Galilee. He sees Peter, Andrew, James, and John—all of them fishermen, mending their nets, casting them into the sea—and he tells them, "Come with me, and I will make you fishers of people." This apparently sounds like a good idea to them, so they get up, leave their nets, and follow.

Rather than a story of miracles, this is a story of *call*. Jesus literally, verbally calls these four men to himself, and they leave everything behind to follow him.

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Much is often made of the idea of call in the Episcopal Church. For example, if you want to become an Episcopal priest, you are not allowed to just wake up one day, put on a black shirt and a white collar, and go around blessing people and saying Mass willy-nilly. First you have to be able to express how it is that you think you know God has *called* you. You go before vestries, bishops, discernment groups, commissions on ministry, and standing committees, and over the course of many years you are asked over and over (and over) to tell the story of your call. You tell the story of how you heard God's invitation to ministry. You tell the story of how you know this is what you're supposed to do. You tell the story of what it might mean for you to be an ordained fisher of people.

The problem, however, is that we often act like clergy are the only ones who can or should hear the call of God on their lives. Without meaning to, we talk as though God only calls special people to special things like priesthood and doesn't care two bits about what the rest of us do. Today's Gospel stands to show us that this assumption is not true.

The truth is that the *only* thing to which Jesus calls *any* of us is . . . discipleship. *I* am called to follow Jesus. *You* are called to follow Jesus. Once we hear that call, the decision about how we can best *be* disciples is—in many ways—just the details. For some of us, yes, being a disciple of Jesus means accepting a vocation like the priesthood or the diaconate. But what about you? My hunch is that most of you in this room are not called to become priests or deacons, but you most definitely *are* called to be disciples of Jesus, followers of the Way. So, day in and day out, how do you live your vocation as a disciple, even as you live your other vocation as a butcher, a baker, or a candlestick-maker?

Long ago in the 1600's there was a layman named Brother Lawrence who was not an ordained cleric but lived in community at a monastery. Brother Lawrence is famous for his closeness to God. He was the kind of guy who, if he was scheduled to peel potatoes in the kitchen that morning, peeled those potatoes for God. If he was scheduled to scrub the pans, he scrubbed those pans for God. After he died, people who knew him wrote down his ideas about being an everyday disciple and put them in a book called *Practicing the Presence of God*. For Lawrence, being a disciple—living the call to follow Jesus—was not about taking on strange, new, specialized tasks, but about dedicating the tasks at hand to the love of God. He once said:

Men invent these means and methods of coming at God's love. They learn rules, and set up devices to remind them of that love, but it just seems like a world of trouble to get yourself into the consciousness of God's presence. Maybe it doesn't have to be so hard. Is it not quicker and easier just to do our common business—our everyday tasks—but to do it wholly for the love of God?

You see, for Lawrence, you didn't have to go off and become a great mystic, priest, or theologian to follow the call of Jesus. You just had to do *whatever* you do . . . *to the glory of God*. If you're a potato peeler, then you peel those potatoes to the glory God and rejoice in

knowing that your potatoes are going to feed someone. *That's* a ministry. If you're a school teacher, then you teach those children to the glory of God and rejoice that because of you those children are a little better off. *That's* a ministry. And if you're a salesman, then you sell your items to the glory of God and you do so in a way that brings life, help, and health to others. *That's* a ministry. Whatever you do, Jesus calls you to follow him. You can do that no matter who you are, what your job is, or where the day takes you.

Now, although I said at the beginning that today's Gospel is not a miracle story, that may not be entirely true. There is something at least a little miraculous about the fact that those four fishermen were willing to throw down their nets and follow Jesus. Think about that. They were fishermen. Those nets were *everything* to them . . . their livelihood, their financial security, their whole way of life. Those nets were more than their fishing nets; they were their safety nets.

So let me be clear: following the call of God and living as a disciple of Jesus *is* something that can be done by *anyone* in just about *any* vocation. But if I let you out of here thinking that being a disciple of Jesus is an *easy* thing . . . if I let you out of here thinking that you *won't* have to give anything up along the way . . . if I let you out of here thinking that you won't have to *leave your safety nets behind* . . . then I would be telling you a lie. Very often, Jesus calls us to follow in the *hard* way, the way of the cross, the way that is utter foolishness to the rest of the world.

And so, brothers and sisters, you are challenged on this day to hear and to heed the call of Jesus on your life. Perhaps you are called to the extraordinary; more likely, you are called to the ordinary. But either way, I dare you to ask yourself every day, "This thing I'm doing: am I truly doing it to the glory of God? Am I doing it for the love of God? Am I following in the way of Jesus?" If the answer is a definite and fulfilling "yes," well then, there you go. If the answer is "no," then maybe it's time to get up, cast your safety net aside, and follow Jesus . . . wherever he may lead.

Amen.