

“Follow Me!”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
21st Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 25, 2019

First Scripture Reading - Psalm 139 (NRSV)

¹O Lord, you have searched me and known me. ²You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. ³You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. ⁴Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. ⁵You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. ⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. ⁷Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? ⁸If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. ⁹If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, ¹⁰even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. ¹¹If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,” ¹²even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you. ¹³For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. ¹⁴I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. ¹⁵My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. ¹⁶Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. ¹⁷How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! ¹⁸I try to count them - they are more than the sand; I come to the end - I am still with you.

Second Scripture Reading - Matthew 4:18-23 (NRSV)

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.



Sermon – “Follow Me!”

Today’s Scripture serves as a shifting story, that is a story that helps move us from one place to another. Remember that Matthew’s gospel begins with a long genealogy serving to link Jesus with the Israelite lineage. Then we get the birth story and the arrival of the wise men and then onto John the Baptist and his baptism of Jesus. Remember that John spoke to crowds about Jesus’ coming and then he baptized Jesus and Jesus immediately leaves to go into the wilderness for 3 days. Upon his return, Jesus learns that John has been arrested. And then it happens. This shift of the focus from John to Jesus. Tom Long likens it to a shifting in the tectonic plates¹. That process where those tectonic plates on the earth’s surface push up against each other causing movement that we can often see and/or feel. It is a shift that changes the earth’s surface – it changes what has been. For Matthew, everything before now was the prelude...this Matthew text today is the beginning of the ministry of Jesus the Messiah. And Jesus’ very first action is to call the first disciples.

Jesus is walking on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and sees 2 brothers fishing and invites them to follow. Matthew tells us “Immediately, they left their nets and followed Jesus.” Then as Jesus and Simon and Andrew continue to walk, they come upon James and John. Jesus calls out to them to follow. And, they too,

immediately leave their boat and father and follow him. And in that very next verse – we presume they are following Jesus as he teaches and preaches and heals those who are sick. Jesus calls, and off they go.

I am always struck by the word “immediately” that repeats in this passage. Twice Jesus calls fishermen and twice they respond – Immediately. There is no pause or hesitation. No making of pro/con lists. No goodbye party from family or friends. They simply drop their nets and follow...immediately. That idea of acting without thinking feels so foreign to me and so foreign to our world that seems to value and feed off of plans and schedules. I love how Barbara Brown Taylor puts it – she says, “If the call comes tomorrow, could you get up from your chair and walk out the door, without taking your keys, your phone, or turning off the lights? Could you abandon your grocery cart in front of the frozen food case at Kroger and walk right out to follow Jesus to who knows where before calling home?”ⁱⁱ This is essentially what those first four recruits did. They did not know Jesus; were not looking for Jesus. They simply heard his call and for some reason they followed.

It is not unusual for preachers and teachers to focus on this idea that we simply substitute ourselves in for the disciples and then interpret this passage to say we, too, are called to drop everything, immediately, and follow Jesus.

But to focus on the fishermen and lift them up as the main actors in this story misses the point of the Scripture. This story is really not about the choice of the fishermen to follow. This story is about God and God’s irresistible call. Barbara Brown Taylor again says “This is no story about the power of human beings to change their own lives, to leave everything behind and follow. This is a story about the power of God...to walk right up to a quartet of fishermen and work a miracle, creating faith where there was no faith, creating disciples where there were none just a moment before.”ⁱⁱⁱ Our 21st century world is so dominated by control and we are so enamored with independence and not needing anyone, that we often miss what Matthew is telling us. Jesus’ call to discipleship is not about our choice, it is about God’s choice...and we are it.

Look at this crew. These are fishermen. They are out there on the side of the sea doing the hard work of throwing nets into the water then dragging them back in again. They are not wealthy, they are not highly educated, they are not rabbis or priests. They are ordinary people with ordinary lives and ordinary responsibilities. There is not anything special about them other than God chose them! God chose them to cast aside the community that they know and calls them to become a part of the new community God is creating through Jesus. A community that will be made up of ordinary people called to follow Jesus. And Jesus will use them to change the world.

This story is about God’s call for ordinary people like you and me to follow. The God who made us and equips us is calling us to follow Jesus into the ministry Jesus is doing in the world. The call is not, “Follow me after you feel more comfortable with your knowledge of the Bible.” The call is not, “Follow me once you are well established in the church.” The call is not, “Follow me only when you feel secure in your faith.” The call is not, “Follow me when your schedule is clear.” God’s call is to follow – each and every day – and to trust that God has already given us gifts and already is equipping us to do the work of the kingdom. The call is to join together into a new community – formed solely on God’s love for us. A new community that follows that love out into the world through acts of love, justice and compassion. “This story is about being swept into the flow of God’s will (and God’s love) and giving ourselves over to it.”^{iv} It is about following Jesus again, and again, and again.

Rodger Nishioka tells this great story about watching a TV show with his Dad on the elephant seals of Argentina. The cameras followed this harem of seals. Soon after a mother births her pup, she leaves her pup on the shore so she can go feed in the rich waters off the coast. After feeding, she returns to a different part

of the beach and begins to call for her baby. Since there is often a birthing season, there are other elephant seal mothers doing the same thing at the same time so there are many mothers calling for their babies at one time. So they call their pups and listen for their response. Following each other's voices and scents, soon the mother and pup are reunited. The TV host explained that from the moment of birth, the sound and scent of the pup are imprinted in the mother's memory and the sound and scent of the mother are imprinted in the pup's memory. At this point, Rodger's father turns to him and says, "You know, that's how it is with God. We are imprinted with a memory of God and God is imprinted with a memory of us and even if it takes a lifetime, God will find us." ^v

Friends, God made us. God knows who we are and what we are capable of and God comes to us right where we are and says, "It's time. Follow me! Follow me!"

In the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

End Notes

ⁱ Long, Thomas G. *Matthew: Westminster Bible Companion*. Westminster-John Knox, Louisville, KY, 1997. pg. 41.

ⁱⁱ Taylor, Barbara Brown *Home by Another Way*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, Maryland. 1999. Pg. 38

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, 39.

^{iv} Ibid, 40.

^v Nishioka, Rodger. *Feasting on the Word: Third Sunday After Epiphany*. Westminster-John Knox, Louisville, KY, 2010. pp. 284-5.