

Come, Follow Me

Matthew 4:12-25

Crossroads Christian Church

Isaiah 9:1-4

Jan 26, 2014 Epiphany 3A

Over the years, I have enjoyed seeing how Hollywood and television portray God calling people. My memory goes clear back to Charlton Heston before the burning bush, skips to George Burns as God calling John Denver, playing a grocery clerk in the "O God" series, and on to Morgan Freeman as the divine Being in Bruce Almighty and Evan Almighty. In the TV series Joan of Arcadia a few years back, God took many forms in talking with a teenage girl. You can probably add other cinematic deities to my list.

It's an intriguing concept, isn't it? What if God took on human form and invited us to be a part of God's slow and subtle process for transforming and redeeming the world? What if?

Then we realize, it isn't such a new idea after all. God did become one of us. God did walk alongside humans along the lakeshores of everyday life. God did invite humans to be part of God's slow and subtle process for transforming and redeeming the world. It's something we lift up in Epiphany—how God reveals Godself to us in Jesus Christ. That's why we heard a few minutes ago the story of a man named Jesus, walking along that lakeside, and offering an invitation to common, everyday workers. Come, follow me.

About eight centuries before Jesus walked those shores of Galilee, that very region was in tough times. The situation was dark and grim. The Northern Kingdom of Israel had been conquered by the new superpower of Assyria. Their leaders had been carried away and scattered among the empire. They had felt cursed, going clear back to the blessings that Jacob had given his twelve sons. But in the Southern Kingdom, Judah, the prophet Isaiah looked beyond the darkness to a light that would one day come. "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.

On those living in a pitch-dark land, light has dawned." Those who had been plundered would one day enjoy the fruits of their own harvests again. Fast-forwarding 800 years to the time when Matthew was recalling the career of Jesus, that prophecy of Isaiah would come to mind, because that northern land, still dark

under Roman oppression, would be brightened by a new kind of light. That light, the light of God's love through Jesus Christ, would shine upon Jew and Gentile alike. Things had seemed dark when John the Baptizer was arrested, but Jesus had come to announce, "Repent"—or as the Common English Bible puts it, "Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the Kingdom of Heaven!" (4:17)

Last week, we heard John's Gospel tell of how Jesus invited Andrew and another follower of John the Baptist, by saying, "Come and see." Andrew was so enthused that he ran home and dragged Peter with him. Now, in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is in a different place, at a different time, and meets them at their work, and invites them to drop their nets and follow him, and he will help them learn to fish for people. Two different stories. Contradictory? Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe they represent two phases of involvement. The first invitation, Come and See, invites them to get to know Jesus as a person, and to find in him what John the Baptist saw—God's Messiah, the Christ.

Then, maybe, he gave them a little time and space to absorb it all, and later showed up back home in Galilee. There he gave them a second invitation, "Come, follow me"—this one, not for a day but for a lifetime. Instead of casting nets for fish, they would cast another kind of net—the net of God's invitation—to catch people for God's reign.

They dropped their nets. They followed. They watched. They watched him pray. They saw strange and wonderful things, signs that God was truly in their midst. People whose lives were torn up with guilt and remorse discovered the joy of God's forgiving love. People with devastating illnesses or injuries were healed. Great crowds were fed. Storms were calmed. People's faces lit up with new understanding as Jesus explained to them a whole new vision of God. They followed Jesus to Jerusalem, knowing that danger was imminent. They followed him to the Upper Room, where he showed them a new way of remembering his presence, in bread and in wine. They scattered in the garden, but then they gathered for the good news of resurrection. They carried his good news to the ends of the earth. Simple, ordinary people, like you

and like me, accepted a call that turned the whole world upside down.

A poem by William Percy captures something of what happened that day.

They cast their nets in Galilee/ just off the hills of brown;
such happy simple fisherfolk,/ before the Lord came down.
Contented, peaceful fishermen,/ before they ever knew
The peace of God that filled their hearts / brimful, and broke
them too.

Young John who trimmed the flapping sail, / homeless in Patmos
died.

Peter, who hauled the teeming net,/ head down was crucified.
The peace of God, it is no peace, / but strife closed in the sod.
Yet brothers pray for but one thing, / the marvelous peace of
God.ⁱ

Simon, Andrew, James and John, and all the rest, weren't the only ones to hear Jesus say "come to me, and I'll teach you how to fish for people." We each accept that call in some way as we become Christians, for we are invited to walk with Jesus, to witness to others, to let God's love work through us, to help and to heal, and to be God's agents in transforming the world.

There's a progression to Jesus' call. It began with "Come and see." Then, the invitation, "Come, Follow Me." But eventually the disciples would become apostles, would carry out the message of God's new day to the whole world. The "Come" would become "Go." "Go into all the world. Preach. Teach. Baptize." And with it the promise, "I will be with you." The invitation, the command, and the promise are still ours today.

For some of us, this has been expressed as a call to ordained or lay ministry. For most of us, our baptism was our call to minister in Christ's name through our every-day activities and lives, through our work, through our stewardship, and through our relationships.

But the call of Christ isn't just addressed to individuals, it's addressed to the whole church. How much emphasis do we put on following Christ, on doing Christ's will, as a congregation? How much emphasis do we put on fishing for people, on reaching out to those in need, on letting others know the good news of Jesus

Christ? Is most of our attention spent turned in on ourselves, and our own institutional life, or is it spent on being engaged in being a part of God's transforming message to the world? Some critics have rightly said that instead of fishing for people, we Christians spent most of our time being keepers of the aquarium. It's a painful thing to hear because it's so true.

We have an opportunity to stretch ourselves from just caring about our own needs to caring about the community around us. Wednesday evening, and on the last Wednesday of every month, our usual DVD time will become a time of relational Bible study, when we sit down and have supper together with clients of Beacon. We'll get acquainted with them, share our food and our faith, and we'll receive gifts from them, too, as we get to know them.

So Christ is still calling, Come, Follow me. One of my favorite pastor-poets, Timothy Haut, put it this way.

FOLLOW ME

Follow me

Into the winter of sorrow,
the season of aching cold
and the sad cry in the wind.

Follow me empty-handed
into the shadows
of the fierce, fearful world
and make miracles with me.

Be the dream of sunshine
to those who dwell in darkness.

Surprise the hard-bitten, loveless ones
with kindness.

Lift those who cannot walk
and dance them into joy.

Seed the frozen ground with hope.

Gather the sick and dying
into the boat of your love,
and sail them into the sunrise
of eternal spring.

We can do this.
Follow me. Amen.ⁱⁱ

By Michael E. Dixon

ⁱ William Alexander Percy, "They Cast their Nets" Hymn 661 in Episcopal Hymnal, 1982 ©

ⁱⁱ Timothy Haupt, "Follow Me," Midrash lectionary study group, 1/22/14. Midrash@joinhands.com