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*Matthew 4:12-22*

*12 Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. 13 He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, 14 so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 15 "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles -- 16 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." 17 From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."*

*18 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. 19 And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." 20 Immediately they left their nets and followed him. 21 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. 22 Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. (NRSV)*

I've preached this text before. After 40 years (1,000+ sermons), I suppose I could just grab an old one and read it to you. But for me, that would be just creepy. I did look back at what I said, and it included a throw-away line, a kind of one-liner that got a chuckle or two. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

When I used that throwaway line, I was talking about this text. Matthew tells us that Jesus moved about 20 miles from Nazareth, to a region along the Sea of Galilee so miserable that Isaiah describes it as a place of "darkness...the shadow of death". It was also a microcosm of the world: Jews, Gentiles, people on the margins... Jesus grew up in a place like that, and understood how cruel it could be.

Later, when He said "when you saw me hungry and fed me, or saw me naked and clothed me, or sick, or in prison, and visited me, you did it—or you failed to do it—to me", He did not mean "just be nice to the poor." He could put a face and a name on them, and there was fire in His eyes.

In that shadowy place, He began preaching to those who desperately needed it, that God's reign of abundance and justice had "come near"—so near that you can now see and touch God. And He began recruiting His disciples.

He starts with people who *fish* for a living. Here's a "60-second history lesson:" Fishermen were poor, and taxed nearly to death in an economy controlled by the powerful...and their religious leaders provided no comfort at all. On the contrary; the clergy also profited from this cruel bureaucracy, where taxes and rigid social rules kept the poor *poor*. These fishermen were likely illiterate; they had no money, no political connections. They'd been taught to obey their religion, but whether they obeyed or not, it's likely that they were indifferent toward and probably angry with it; it was just another oppressive blanket smothering their dreams and hope. Religion was part of the system that controlled their lives and crushed their joy.

I hope things are different for you. I hope you find hope and joy and affirmation here. I say that because I see many people, most tragically our young, choosing to feed their spirits outside the faith that we share. Even the word "religion" is seen negatively in our culture, and "Christian" has come to mean something judgmental, legalistic...and

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unattractive. That grieves me, and I want my message to be what Jesus said: “The realm of God’s freedom and abundance has come near to you!” Because it’s not a vague, distant wish, or a lost hope of what once way. And it is my hope that when we gather, we hear Good News that sets us free from fear and shame, liberating us to give ourselves joyfully and confidently away.

What did Jesus see in these fishermen? Here’s that throwaway line, that one-liner that I used in 2005: “I’m still offended that Jesus picked not one single clergy!” It was tongue in cheek, but I know precisely why Jesus avoided the religious professionals of the day.

People often say that Jesus came to start a new religion. He did not. But *if* He was starting a new religion, why not call in the trained professionals? People who understand theology, management, ritual, marketing, psychology, and the most important qualification of all: fundraising? Instead, Jesus seeks out the least religious people around? Why?

I think that if Jesus had called clergy, they would have said “no”. I think I might have. Many of the disciples are called “saints” for their courage and vision: St. John, St. Mary, St. Peter...they have churches, colleges, entire towns named for them. St. Andrew even has a golf course in his honor. But how many religious leaders of the day were named saints? Maybe one (Nicodemus). All too often, they’d signed on to an institution that give them status and power, precisely what Jesus wanted to abolish. Jesus didn’t establish a new organization and demand that people obey a new set of rules. Jesus gave the power to choose back to the powerless, inviting them to trust, and then to put their gifts to work in spreading God’s realm of love.

If He were talking to those of us who are teachers, He may have said: “Follow me, and you will teach the most important lessons of life.” To doctors and nurses: “Follow me, and you will heal wounded souls as well as bodies.” To lawyers: “Follow me, and you will bring God’s justice.” To tradespeople: “Follow me, and work with God to create beauty and value in ordinary things.” To parents: “Follow me, and you will nurture children toward Godliness.” To the retired: “Follow me, and in service, in example, in a ministry of prayer, your most satisfying days may be just beginning.” To students: “Follow me, and you will learn how you can change your world.”

What those fishermen looks almost casual, walking away from nets and boats and family. People will sometimes walk away from a job, but no one walks casually away from their life. For all their flaws, these fishermen had the courage to believe that fish and nets were not all they were created to do.

These may be hard days for organized religion, but these are great days to be a follower of Jesus. The future belongs to people willing to risk, or willing to stand ready, to see God’s kingdom come. This is how God’s new days dawns, and how the realm of God can “come near” in Hales Corners.

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This sermon has no conclusion. You and God will have to write it. You probably won't have to walk away from your job, pension, health and dental, to follow Jesus. In fact, your job, home, volunteer work, political activism, hobbies, art, poetry, music, may be where you do your "spiritual fishing." But are you willing to be led in new directions? To be motivated by new things? Can you trust God's judgment that you can handle unexpected challenges? You will get opportunities: to squander your life on things, to chase the insignificant. But I hope: when opportunity knocks, you'll have a sign on the door: "Gone fishing. And I'm not turning back."

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