

Matthew 4:12-23  
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“Called into the Unknown”

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When I was a child my father worked long, hard hours. He managed 150 low income, subsidized apartment units on the East side of Nashville, TN. This meant Dad was out of the house before we woke up in the morning to get office work done. Then, he came home in afternoon in time to have dinner with the family. After which he took a nap so he could go back overnight to serve as the night watchman, keeping the complex safe from around 10pm until 2 or 3 in the morning, then coming home to rest again before he headed back the next morning.

During my elementary school years, Mom became concerned that my father and I were not having enough Father/Son time. She suggested Dad and I go away for a weekend, just the two of us. So, one weekend we packed our duffel bags and climbed into Dad’s truck. The plan was to have NO PLAN. Dad would drive out of the driveway and allow me to tell him where to go. I got to choose our route turn by turn. When we were tired of driving be it 1 hour, or 6 hours, we would stop at a hotel and spend a day or two checking out the area together. While we took road trips as a family, I still remember how special that weekend was with Dad.

In today’s story the author tells of Jesus calling the first disciples. We hear how each set of disciples followed Jesus Immediately. We don’t even know if they knew who Jesus was for sure? But, in verse 19, Jesus calls Peter and Andrew. “Immediately they left their nets and followed him.” Then in verse 22, he calls James and John. “Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.”

Today, our congregation begins a course on immigration. We will meet this morning and then the first three Sunday’s in February. As I prepared for this morning’s message I thought of all those immigrants, documented and undocumented who set out for a better life. They don’t know when or if they will ever see their family again. They don’t know if they will ever make it in the new land. Yet, for many the circumstances of life where they are have become so unbearable, they make a life or death journey to see if they can improve things for their family.

Ponder a moment how difficult it would be to leave everything you have worked so hard to create: Family, home, friends, neighbors, foods, language, culture, everything. One scholar writes that the first two disciples, Simon and Andrew are poor (they have only nets, no boat.) Then adds the Sons of Zebedee are more affluent because they have a boat. He closes saying, “Jesus’ call doesn’t confirm the status quo of our comfortable, orderly, productive lives; it rearranges the patterns of our lives into a new design, not to destroy but to renew.” These first disciples are hungry. Hungry for something more than the food they work so hard for each day, and they just walk away from the labor that brings survival, perhaps in order to thrive spiritually as much, or moreso, than materially.

Have you ever set out for a day or two with no plan of where to go? Have you ever been moved to a new place unexpectedly because of a new job, or new circumstances in life? We are people on the go more than we care to admit!

Of course, the gospel is not a verbatim retelling of everything said among Jesus and his followers. There may be a back story to the calling of the disciples with which we are not familiar. Yet, the author wants us to recognize the urgency and impact of these decisions. The spiritual wisdom this story holds this morning is: In the final analysis, it's simply true that the decision to follow Jesus Christ is one we make before we have all the facts. Those disciples didn't follow Jesus because they had it all figured out. They took to the road because there was something in him. The same is true for us.

Back in the Middle Ages the great theologian, Anselm, coined a three-word Latin phrase which translates, "Faith seeks understanding." Just thirty years ago, Christian author Frederick Buechner said much the same thing: "A Christian is one who points at Christ and says, 'I can't prove a thing, but there is something about his eyes and his voice. There's something about the way he carries his head, his hands, the way he carries his cross—the way he carries me.'"

We follow in order to understand the One we follow. We go in order to discover where we are going. This is not the typical way we manage road trips. We prefer highlighted trip-tix, maps and gps. We prefer well-planned, know-where-you-are-going trips. But that is not the way with Jesus.

Throughout the year this congregation celebrates baptisms, we welcome new members, we open our hearts to folks who have become unconvinced by strict and narrow expressions of faith. We warmly welcome those who have questions and lift them up alongside our own. We invite one another into a journey instead of giving standard answers. We invite each other to come and serve Christ together. We invite all to respond to their call.

Sometimes though, we who have been in the church put undue pressure on ourselves. We are tempted to believe these whom we welcome expect us to have all the answers. We think new people on the journey expect us to know all about the bible, all about God, all about the path. The calling of the disciples should comfort us. Those first disciples didn't know much if anything about who was calling them, or where they were being called to. And, even later when the last disciples came aboard, the first ones still didn't know very much. We who have been on this path don't have to have it all figured out. In fact we can't. Faith is a journey. Each of us knows only what we will ever come to know about God and about Jesus and about being a Christian through the act of following. The path itself is the teacher. Pastors and other leaders help guide us, but they too are on the journey.

We may think of it this way, we learn to swim by swimming. Pre-jumping instructions are vital, "but we can only learn to swim by getting in the water; floating, kicking, arm stroking, and breathing. We must do it. And if we want to become good, we need to practice, and practice and practice.

The journey of faith will be beset by times we fall, times we fail, times we get it wrong. It will include times of mountain top inspiration, healing comfort, and warmest love when we most need it. And God is there for all of it. But the one thing we will never have is a precise roadmap.

Author Maya Angelou. When she was 8 years old, stopped speaking. Imagine we might never have been inspired by her distinctly articulate, metaphorically significant, powerful voice. She silenced her voice because she thought her voice had killed a man. For almost five years, she spoke to no one but her beloved brother, Bailey.

The man she believed she had killed with her voice -- her mother's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman -- had raped her. After she testified against him in his trial, he was convicted and sentenced, but released from jail. Four days later he was found dead. Murdered. Probably by Maya's uncles her memoir implies.

What if one of the most powerful voices of the last century had been lost forever? Yet, in her early 20's, during a voice lesson Maya's teacher asked her to read aloud from a book. She came across the line "God loves me," and repeated it nestled deep in the fabric of her soul -- and she realized that young black women could do great things. She has become a voice of inspiration and wisdom to which millions of people still turn to today.

So I invite you to ask yourself again... What is the journey God is calling you to? What excuses have you accepted which keep you from responding to God's call? What fears hold you back from stepping into that journey? How might you find ways to stride into your calling even before you have all the answers, because it seems the way to be strengthened in Christ, is through the journey.

Amen.