

“The Light May be Trying to Find You”

Matthew 4.12-23

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3rd Sunday after Epiphany

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When I was a kid I always thought of the disciples as the kids in the top of their class. I figured you'd have to be the cream of the crop to get that close to wonder-boy Jesus. So of course when Jesus called them to follow him they'd drop their knapsacks right where they heard his voice and follow him. It was pretty cool, too, to see my own name in the story - Andrew - must have been a pretty special person to get a call from the Son of God.

As I got older I had more questions. Why would someone just drop everything they were doing and follow Jesus especially since he'd only moved to Capernaum recently? And wasn't it kind of irresponsible of these fisher people to just leave everybody else behind? Peter left without consulting his wife, James and John left their father at work in the boat. What kind of people do that?

At this point on my journey I think I decided Jesus must be an incredibly charismatic person with a magnetic ability to make disciples. He probably could do that Jedi thing you know where you wave your finger and say stuff like, "You want to drop everything," and the person's like "I want to drop everything" - that must be the way he gets these disciples to follow him.

But I've been around the block now enough times to know these disciples weren't special, *they were desperate!* They had nothing better to do with themselves. Fishing was kind of a dead-end gig and maybe they didn't want to be like their parents slaving away day after day until death came and their lives were spent. Maybe they wanted to be out there doing bigger stuff. Prophesying, and healing and ruffling some feathers of the urban elites.

It's possible they were desperate to be in school, as some have suggested. And by "in school" I mean disciples - students - of a teacher. Maybe they dropped everything because the reputable rabbis had already said, "we're good, thanks." Or maybe Jesus just caught them on one of those days where you think to yourself - I need a little more adventure in my life or I'm not going to make it into work next week much less for the remainder of my life and Jesus just happened to roll the dice when the odds were in his favor. Whatever their motivation, it's a weird choice of people to recruit for changing the world - fisher people. I mean I get the metaphor - you fish for fish and now you'll fish for people - but the two don't exactly translate. I have nothing against fishermen and I don't mean to sound classist or anything - it's more like if the Harvard

recruiting office called and asked who they should interview to start the next revolution, Bass Pro Shop customers down shore wouldn't be the first thought that came to mind.

Speaking of location, Jesus is there as far as I can tell, not because it's prime recruiting territory but because he's running away from one of those vicious Herods who continues to come after anybody who seems like a threat, most recently John the Baptist who has now been arrested. John was baptizing much closer to Jerusalem and Jesus had gone south from the region of the Galilee to meet him there, and then into the nearby wilderness to be tempted by the devil. But after John was arrested, Jesus retreated north to the Galilee again, but this time to Capernaum on the far north side of the Sea of Galilee which is more like a lake. It's a weird place to be recruiting. Matthew has an easy explanation for this - it's what the prophets foretold. Just like Bethlehem was that little town outside the power center of Jerusalem - not exactly a place you'd expect a king to be born - except that David was born there; so the Galilee is a similar place also underestimated by the elites - a place that Isaiah promised would become the source of light for all the people.

But I'm a little more skeptical. Recruiting fisher people from a little town on a lake far from Jerusalem today would be like recruiting revolutionaries from Alabama or Nebraska. Nothing against those places - really. They're just not the first places that come to mind when you think of world changing discipleship material - more like people who are looking for their best chance to get out, or people who are looking for their best chance to do bigger and better things than they'd be able to do without some outside assistance. So they follow Jesus not because they think he's all powerful or even the Messiah - at least not yet. They follow him because *he tells them they'll be able to take what abilities they have and use them in a bigger way than they are using them right now.*

That's the way Jesus recruits new people. Not by threatening them with punishment. Not by showering them with riches or fame. Not by looking for people who are already spiritually disciplined or have it all together. Simply by finding people *who are missing something, longing for something more, hoping for something more and inviting them to bring who they are to do bigger things with the gifts they already have.* Inviting them to join him to teach, and preach and bring healing to people who need it, meeting people where they are, just as Jesus first meets them holding their nets.

I think that's what most people want, at least those who are at all interested in some kind of spiritual experience. Meaning, purpose, and agency. The ability to take the gifts that you already have - whatever they are - and put them to good use for the sake of others, which paradoxically feeds your own longing to contribute, to make a difference to somebody, to leave the world a little bit better off than how you found it. Which, according to Matthew's story, doesn't require you to go back to school and get a degree, doesn't require you to plan out the next ten years of your life, doesn't require extensive financial or other kind of planning. It just means that you accept the invitation

- whenever it comes - to take the gifts you already have - whatever they are and get out there to help God proclaim good news and bring some healing.

It happened the day before Christmas Eve to a couple in Buffalo. They were just minding their own business, hunkering down for the blizzard that was already upon them, when a knock came at the door. A couple of South Korean tourists, traveling to Niagara Falls, had their van stuck in a ditch. They wanted to know if they could borrow some shovels to dig it out. Alexander and Andrea Campagna weren't professional ditch diggers - they were both in the healthcare profession - but they did know something about storms and this one was not the kind that anyone should be traveling in. So they invited all 10 stranded South Korean visitors to stay with them in their 3 bedroom house, some on couches and floors until the storm passed. As an added bonus to the Korean visitors, Andrea and Alexander were big Korean food fans. Mirin, soy sauce, Korean red pepper paste, sesame oil, chili flakes, kimchi and a rice cooker all were on hand to take food from the fridge (that was packed full to ride out the storm) and make of it a feast for 12.

You might think that Alexander and Andrea were saints for providing that kind of hospitality and maybe they were. But the hospitality they offered just magnified into a giant blessing for everybody. One of the South Koreans was an exceptional cook - they enjoyed delicious, authentic Korean food. "We will never forget this," Alexander told the reporter who wrote the story, remarking that now he and Andrea are planning a trip to South Korea. All they had to do was open their door to the opportunity that was right in front of them, with nothing more than themselves to do something bigger things than they could have done on their own.¹

And look, I know that life is not always like that. There are days when you don't have the energy to open the door for any new opportunity much less hosting a group of ten on Christmas Eve eve. But Jesus knows those days, too. In fact, if I'm reading this story right, *the whole Galilee mission was prompted by Jesus' withdrawal* from wherever he had been in that wilderness adjacent to Jerusalem, retreating instead to Galilee. His withdrawal was prompted by John the Baptist's arrest. That's not exactly the kind of experience that will put you in the frame of mind to want to be healing or helping anybody. It would make you want to close your doors and hide.

Except that, as Matthew points out, plan B was already in the cards if you believe that text from Isaiah (Isaiah 9:1-4). The scary kind of darkness is real, it's just that the light is ready to match it.

And while I would never want to suggest a kind of trite "when one door closes, a window opens" kind of cause and effect platitude designed by people who have trouble sitting with their own feelings of loss, disappointment or sadness, I have noticed that a lot of life is about staying present to what is happening and doing your best to say yes to

¹ Christine Chung, "They Traveled From South Korea. They Got Stranded Near Buffalo," *The New York Times*, December 25, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/25/nyregion/snow-storm-korean-tourists.html>

whatever next crazy thing God might be putting in front of you. Not working so hard to plan your future that you miss the opportunity of the present to take the gifts that you've so carefully stocked in the fridge that is your life - and putting them to good use for the sake of others, which paradoxically feeds your own longing to contribute, to make a difference to somebody, to leave the world a little bit better off than how you found it.

In the wake of most retreats from what has hurt you, or threatens to hurt you, in the aftermath of most losses or most disappointments - the real stuff of life that knocks the wind out of you and causes you - for good reason - to hide, trusting that after the fallout, in time, God is often at work preparing some new assignment, opening some new way, offering some new life to somebody; maybe somebody who missed out on their initial hopes for what they wanted in their life. Maybe somebody who ended up in a dead-end direction despite their efforts to escape it. Maybe somebody who's been longing to do something bigger with their life but just couldn't seem to get out of the boat that their father wants them to pilot.

God is offering life and to hear that call you don't have to be someone who is already spiritually disciplined or put together. You don't have to have been recruited by one of the top teachers or been to one of the top schools. You don't have to have been born in one of those places where everyone expects to find kings or leaders or someone important. You just have to be a person who is open to your own longing heart; open to the God who finds people where they are and offers them the ability to use the gifts they have in a bigger way than they are using them right now.

That's how God brings the light. Watch for it. It may be trying to find. . .you.