

This Call's For You

A Sermon Preached by the
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Isaiah 9:1-4
Matthew 4:12-23

Poet and novelist James Baldwin once wrote, "Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it . . . the end of safety." So it must have been for these four men, Simon, James, John and Andrew, called away from what they had always known and into a way of life that would radically change their worldview, their sense of safety, their sense of community and their sense of self.

There's not much point in wondering if they were ready or equipped for this new life. Of course, they weren't, they were fishermen. That's all they had ever done, that's all they knew, fishing was the only job they had ever had. And, although they didn't know it at the time, this new job offer didn't come with a lot of benefits. Think about it: no pay, no pension or medical benefits, no vacation time, possible threats on your life, long hours, and most of the time people didn't listen to you anyway, so it wasn't going to do a lot for your self-esteem. If it were advertised on CraigsList today, nobody would even answer the ad, except perhaps out of curiosity.

On the other hand, Jesus didn't exactly ask for resumes or check references. And subsequent events did not demonstrate that these four were particularly well-suited for this call. Simon, later called Peter, betrayed Jesus in a heartbreaking turn of events; James and John, sometimes nicknamed the Sons of Thunder, were not the most agreeable pair to have on board, indulging as they did in dreams about their own enthronement, and, as one writer put it, "missing the point completely when Jesus announced that downward mobility (was) the path to his kingdom." And Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, rarely appears beyond this account and the one we heard last week from the Gospel of John when he ran home to tell Simon that they had found the Messiah.

And yet, when Jesus said, "Follow me," they put down their nets and left everything that was familiar and safe to embark on a new adventure. The writer G.K. Chesterton says, "An adventure is, by its nature, a thing that comes to us. It is a thing that chooses us, not a thing that we choose."

That's how most call stories unfold. Someone is invited by God to begin something new and unexpected, to begin the adventure of discipleship. Someone is called out of complacency or retirement, out of a predictably safe life, and chosen to undertake a new life of prophecy or discipleship or parenting or tribal leadership, and it often means giving up what's familiar and safe.

In her wonderful book entitled "Saint Maybe," novelist Anne Tyler tells the story of the Bedloe family – parents Bee and Doug, and their nineteen year old son Ian, who has become involved in a small, store-front congregation called the Church of the Second Chance. At the direction of the pastor, Reverend Emmett, Ian has taken on the lifelong commitment of helping his parents raise the three children of his deceased brother Danny. For Ian, it is a form of repentance, but also, in an odd way, a call. He believes,

rightly or wrongly, that Danny drove his car into a brick wall, because of something Ian told him about his wife's infidelity. Not only is his brother's death on his conscience, but also the death of the children's mother, who overdosed on sleeping pills not long after Danny died.

Doug and Bee are perplexed by Ian's sudden change in behavior. He has left college in the middle of the year, he's come home and apprenticed himself to a carpenter, and he has devoted himself to raising the children with the help of the members of the Church of the Second Chance, a church quite unlike the Dober Street Presbyterian Church, where Bee and Doug are members.

The following conversation speaks volumes about the difficulty Bee and Doug are having with the Church of the Second Chance, not to mention the difficulty of communication between parents and their almost-adult children.

Doug Bedloe asks, "Ian, have you fallen into the hands of some kind of *sect*?" . . . "No, I haven't," Ian said. "I have merely discovered a religion that makes sense to me, the way Dober Street Presbyterian makes sense to you and Mom."

"Dober Street didn't ask us to abandon our educations," his mother told him. "Of course, we have nothing against religion: we raised all of you children to be Christians. But *our* church never asked us to abandon our entire way of life."

"Well, maybe it should have," Ian said.¹

Ian's parents react the way most of us probably would, looking at one another in stunned silence, until Bee is finally able to sputter, "I don't believe it. I do not believe it. No matter how long I've been a mother, it seems my children can still come up with something new and unexpected to do to me."²

Ian, of course, is quick to reassure her that it's not something he's choosing to *do* to her, that it's actually not even about her, but Bee and Doug are not totally convinced that Ian has not simply gone off the deep end. How did he become part of a church that demands that kind of commitment from its members? And then to suggest that their church should consider doing the same. What can he be thinking?

I sometimes wonder if Zebedee felt the same way! What can they be thinking? It's a pretty good business, fishing, even if the hours are long and the work is hard. And what am I supposed to do without the help of my sons? One writer wondered if Zebedee simply wasn't invited, or perhaps he was, but then turned down the invitation.

He writes, "If that's true, Zebedee stands out in this passage as the one who does not respond. While four spring to their feet, one hesitates. Four drop their nets. One isn't quite ready to go."

And then he goes on to say, "I am not saying this to beat up on poor old Zebedee. It's not about trying to make him look bad next to his sons – those two poster boys of Christian enthusiasm. I find myself wondering about Zebedee because out of all the characters in this story, he is the one I most relate to. I too have been known to sit in the boat awhile and mull things over."³

Well, haven't we all? I venture to say there's a bit of Zebedee in each of us. All of us have call stories. Mine is probably a bit different from yours, but only because I'm called to a different ministry function. And all of us have doubts that keep us sitting in the boat awhile.

There is a little sign that's always in my office – not ever in a prominent place, mind you, this time it's in the closet where I see it every time I hang up my coat or put on

¹ Anne Tyler, *Saint Maybe*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1991, p. 127.

² Ibid.

³ Mark Ralls, "What About Zebedee?", *Christian Century*, January 11, 2005, p. 17.

my robe - and it reads: "I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and, doggone it, people like me." If you were ever a fan of Saturday Night Live, you might remember those words as the closing affirmation of Al Franken's character Stuart Smalley. Stuart Smalley was a sort of personal coach, someone who helped people work on their self-esteem issues, and at the end of his program, he would always turn to the mirror and say those words, inviting his fans to repeat them after him: "I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and, doggone it, people like me."

The sign in my office looks like a cartoon ransom note: the letters are all cut out of magazines, and they're pasted on black paper with some additional decorative touches. It was made for me by a friend after I failed one of my ordination exams. One of the examination readers, and they tend to be a tough crowd anyway, had gone so far as to write the words, "woefully inadequate" on my New Testament exegesis. Now I don't know how you might respond to that kind of constructive criticism, but I went from zero to sixty in about thirty seconds, at the end of which time I had translated those words to mean that I was "woefully inadequate," and clearly in the wrong line of work. What had I been thinking? What on earth had I been doing in seminary all those years if God didn't have a Plan B? Was it really a call or was I just hearing the voices of well-meaning friends?

Well, that lasted about a week, at which point I heard the words of Stuart Smalley ringing in my ears. I remember so clearly that I was sitting in the church parking lot, re-reading the exam, and I just laughed out loud when I realized that God always has a Plan B. In this case, it was for me to take the exam over again, with a lot of work and study in between, and get on with my ministry. Failing an ordination exam is not the ultimate rejection. It's simply failing an ordination exam. And seeing that funny little sign puts that particular incident – and a lot of others since then – in an entirely different perspective.

I have found myself saying yes to things that I never imagined myself doing – like accepting a position in the presbytery office, or pastoring a church that didn't seem to be a very good match, or agreeing to chair the Committee on Ministry. More recently, I said yes to being part of the task force that planned yesterday's special meeting of the presbytery, and it has been rough going on more than one occasion over the past five months. I would much rather have sat in the boat for a while. But sometimes you just have to know when it's time to put down the nets and say yes. Sometimes you have to trust the call.

We are all, of course, called into discipleship by our baptism. We are baptized into ministry. But most of us struggle to figure out what that means, especially in terms of a call. How are we called to put down our nets and follow Jesus, and if we do, how does that get lived out?

A recent denominational resource entitled, "This Call's For You" is about ways that we respond to God's call in our daily lives. In it is an essay by pastor Ed White who suggests that the heart of our call is not simply to do a particular job, but rather that the heart of our call is to be a Christian in the midst of the work that God has given us to do all week long. And he suggests some ideas for discerning God's will for us.

White suggests that you are best responding to God's call if, first of all, you believe that what you do all week long is something God wants done. It's unlikely that God would call us to do something that God doesn't want to have done. Secondly, perhaps you are best responding to God's call if, on the whole, you find internal meaning and a sense of fulfillment in what you are doing. It's hard to believe that God would ask us to spend our lives doing something meaningless. White says, "To help make the world more just and humane in the midst of all the callousness, cynicism, and despair can be a true adventure." Third, you can believe you are responding if what you are

doing utilizes your God-given gifts and talents. Why would God give us certain abilities and talents and then ask us to spend our lives in a way that has no relation to those God-given gifts? And finally, you are affirmed in what you are doing by other people and believe that you and your vocation are well-matched.

I'd like to suggest some other ways of responding to God's call. I would suggest that we are responding best to God's call if we are willing to wrestle with the doubts, the lapses in faith, the questions that have no sure answers; if we are willing to listen for God's voice in new ways, perhaps even in ways that make us uncomfortable or uncertain of what we believe. The presbytery gathering yesterday bore witness to all of that, the wrestling with doubt, the questions that have no sure answers, and certainly there were moments that were uncomfortable for some.

The question before the presbytery was whether we would restore Dr. Paul Capetz to the office of Minister of Word and Sacrament. Paul teaches at United Seminary, he was ordained a number of years ago by the Chicago Presbytery, but set aside his ordination in 2000 because he is an openly gay man who could not, with integrity, support the 1997 addition to the *Book of Order* that called for "chastity in singleness, and fidelity in marriage." The issue was much more complex than that, and more than we have time to tackle this morning. The presbytery voted by a fairly substantial margin to restore him to ordained ministry. The debate was long, heartfelt, sometimes heated, but the willingness of everybody to stay in the conversation was nothing short of a miracle.

We are responding to God's call if we continue to search for new ways to be in community with one another, to be a witnessing presence in our city, to serve with "energy, intelligence, imagination and love," the very things that we ask of our ordained deacons and elders and ministers. And we are responding to God's call when we are willing to live within the tension that discipleship or prophecy brings, to open our minds to ideas not yet fully formed, and our hearts to new ways of being God's people, new ways of being God's church.

For some of us, this may be the time to put down the nets and step out of the safety of predictability and into something new. For others, it may be the time to stay in the boat and think about it for a while. Either way, we're looking at change. It may mean the breakup of the world as we know it. It may mean, like Ian Bedloe suggests, giving up an entire way of life. We don't know. What we do know is that at this time and in this place, the adventure has chosen us. We are called to discipleship, to follow the One who calls us to a new way of life. Now we need to discern what that discipleship is going to look like for us individually, as members of this church; and as the church in the world, to be a witnessing presence to this community in ways that we cannot yet imagine.

Like those fishermen, we may think we're not particularly well-suited to the task. We may be reluctant to put down what we've always known, what we've been good at, what we understand. But this call's for you. Maybe it's time to put down the nets and say "yes" to the One who says, "Follow me." Amen.