

EPIPHANY THREE, YEAR B, JANUARY 21, 2024

Have you ever made a quick decision that altered the trajectory of your life? Have you ever abruptly quit your job? I daresay most of us would say no. To make such a rash decision would create, in some cases, dire consequences. After all, most of us consider ourselves to be cautious, prudent and dependable and take our responsibilities seriously. To just up and quit one's job would not only be foolish but seriously affect one's ability to fulfill financial obligations let alone be able to eat.

But this is exactly what we have in today's Gospel story. Peter and Andrew and James and John, the sons of Zebedee, abruptly dropped their fishing nets to follow Jesus. Did you ever wonder how James and John's father Zebedee felt or thought? Here are his two sensible sons who all of a sudden get up and leave their nets and their chores. And to do what? To follow a little-known itinerant preacher without so much as a "Tell Mom we will not be home."

It seems inconceivable that anyone would do that. As admirable as it sounds that Peter, Andrew, James and John abruptly followed Jesus, John and James also left their father in the lurch. What caused these four men to blindly follow Jesus. He didn't give them a clear business plan for his start-up ministry nor did he promise success and riches either. His vision statement – if you can call it that from a present-day perspective – is only that his disciples will come to "fish for people." And what exactly does that mean to fish for people?

Think for a moment what fishing is all about. Usually a person will put some kind of bait on their hook to entice the fish to take a nibble and then, hopefully, a bite that will include the hook that will reel them in. Is that what Jesus wants us to do? I think this phrase has often been misinterpreted to mean that we have to "hook" or to "catch" others for God. To hook or catch someone has the connotation of cajoling, manipulating, trapping, bullying others to "accept" Jesus, or join our religion. I don't think that's what Jesus is calling us to do.

As much as this has been the normative and common interpretation of this passage there is another way of looking at it. To do this we have to look at what theologians refer to as the *sitz en leben* which means the situation at the time which includes the socio-economic and political context. There is a fascinating research by K.C. Hansen in his article, "The Galilean Fishing Economy and the Jesus Tradition" that does just that.

According to Hansen, the four fishermen in Mark's story weren't individual workers in a free enterprise system. He writes, "By the time Jesus started recruiting disciples, the fishing industry in Palestine was fully under the control of the Roman Empire. Caesar owned every body of water, and all fishing was state-regulated for the benefit of the urban elite. Fishermen couldn't obtain licenses to fish without joining a syndicate, most of what they caught was exported — leaving local communities impoverished and hungry, deprived of the dietary staple they had depended on for centuries — and the Romans collected exorbitant taxes, levies, and tolls each time fish were sold. To catch even one fish outside of this exploitative system was illegal."

It's in this context that Jesus calls these first four disciples to leave their nets and fish for people. Another author, Ched Myers in his book, *Binding the Strong Man* argues that we narrow and distort the radical nature of this text when we interpret it as an

invitation to issue altar calls. Jesus was not talking about filling pews or baptismal fonts; he was hearkening back to the Hebrew scriptures, in which “the hooking of fish” is a euphemism for judgment upon the rich which is found in Amos and judgment upon the powerful found in Ezekiel. In other words, when Jesus asked Simon, Andrew, James, and John to “fish for people,” he was asking them to cast aside the existing social order of power, privilege, exploitation, and domination, and to help usher in God’s kingdom — a kingdom of justice for the poor, mercy for the oppressed, and abundance for all. He was, in Myers words, inviting commoners “to a fundamental reordering of socio-economic relationships” and to a new and God-honoring way of life that would bless all people.

Unfortunately the phrase I will make you fish for people or the old term fishers of men doesn’t convey the invitation that Jesus extended to these four men or the negative connotation of fishing that includes baiting people. Think with me for a moment if these four men had been builders. Jesus would have said, “Follow me and build my people.” Or what if they were artists? “Follow me and paint the colors of the kingdom.” To parents, “Follow me and nurture my children.” To the dancer: “Follow me and dance with the Spirit.” To the physician, “Follow me and heal broken souls.”

When you put this phrase with other professions, the meaning changes. It’s not about reeling in people but about nurturing, helping, building up the people of God. So the call to all of us: “Follow me and I will *make you* is a promise to cultivate us. It’s a promise rooted in respect not coercion. It’s a promise that when we dare to let go, the things we relinquish might be returned to us in ways we couldn’t have imagined on our own.

Yes, it is easy to fall prey too, I can never make a difference. When we think that way it is very easy to convince ourselves that there is no point in being an active participant in God’s kingdom. However, what would our lives be like if we trusted God to help us accomplish what we are called to do.

There is a story about William Willimon, the former Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, who was invited one night to a campus fraternity to give a talk. His topic was “Character and College.” He went to the fraternity house and was greeted by a young boy of about nine or ten. He was dumbfounded to find a kid of this age at a fraternity at this time of the night and thought there had to be rules against young children in the dorm this late. The young boy took him to the common room to give his talk.

The fraternity was gathered, rather glumly waiting for his presentation or as they thought a lecture. As he began his remarks, Willimon noted that the little boy climbed onto the lap of one of the fraternity brothers and promptly fell asleep with his head on the shoulder of this college kid. Willimon spoke about the moral failures of their generation for about half an hour. When he finished, he asked if they had any questions or comments. Dead silence. So, he thanked them for the honor, and on his way out he heard the college kid say to the little boy, “You go on and get ready for bed. I’ll be in to tuck you in and read you a story.”

When he walked outside one of the frat boys politely thanked Willimon for coming out. Willimon then asked, “Who was the kid there tonight?” “Oh, that’s Darrell,” he said. “The fraternity is part of the Durham Big Brother program. We met Darrell that way. His mom’s on drugs and having a tough time. Sometimes it gets so bad that she can’t care for him. So we told Darrell to call us up when he needs us. We go over, pick him up,

and he stays with us until it's okay to go home. We take him to school, buy him his clothes, books, and stuff.”

“That’s amazing,” Willimon said. “I take back everything I said about you young people being irresponsible.” “I’ll tell you what’s amazing,” the frat kid said. “What’s amazing is that God would pick a guy like me to do something this good for somebody else.”

God has called us and what’s amazing is that God would pick folks like you and me to do something good for somebody else. God calls us, not once, but again and again throughout our lives.

What is God calling you to do? What are you going to do about it? We are all invited to use our own special gifts and talents to follow, to love, to forgive, to witness, to serve, and above all to hope. What will you do? In the words of the poet, Amanda Gorman,

“For there is always light,
if only we’re brave enough to see it.

If only we’re brave enough to be it.

Are we brave enough to be it - the person God calls us to be? Amen.