

Sermon: Something Fishy Going On**Scripture: Matthew 4:12-23****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: January 22, 2023**

I'd like to show you this morning how a biblical passage that buzzes with potency and revolution can have its teeth removed. Then we'll put the teeth back in.

There are the two most common ways of interpreting this story of Jesus on the shores of Galilee calling the fishermen away from their work to be his disciples and fish for people. The first is to lift up the theme of "calling", that we are all called by God, not just people who work in religious life, but all of us are called by God to discipleship in whatever we do. That's true I think, don't you? God's call comes to us in so many ways in so many areas of our lives whatever our work may be, fisherman or lawyer, minister or money manager, teacher or doctor or grocery store clerk. We can hear God's call to us in our everyday work and yes, sometimes God's call to us requires us to to leave our comfort zones as I talked about a couple of weeks ago, step out of our little boats and our tidy lives and risk something different.

There's certainly value in that interpretation and you can take that away with you today if you're unhappy with where this sermon goes.

The second and probably most common way of interpreting this story is the more Billy Graham-style theology where Jesus through his calling of his disciples is calling us to go forth to be evangelists and save souls for heaven. The story is spiritualized and individualized to be about those individual souls in jeopardy of going to hell in the big ocean of life and the requirement of Jesus' disciples to go

forth and tell people about how Jesus died for their sins and save their souls from hell, for heaven. Again, if you want to take that away from this scripture, be my guest... although, the problem with that most common of interpretations is that at this point in the story Jesus is still alive and well, right there with them. SO that's not actually what the disciples are going out to do, right, cause he hasn't died for their sins yet. And actually, at the end of the passage it says what Jesus and his disciples go forth to do once Jesus calls these fishermen away from their work it says: "Jesus went throughout Galilee with his disciples teaching in their synagogues proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness among the people." And many of us have been so thoroughly trained to hear the good news of the kingdom as solely Jesus dying for our sins that there seems to be no other good news to consider. Teeth. Removed.

So now hold onto your hats and your seats cause the waters on which our little church boat is sailing are going to get choppy this morning as we consider this scripture a little more thoroughly. I want to lift up Ched Myers for his biblical scholarship and work that so often breaks open the scriptures to show the broader and deeper potency than we often can see. Much of what I share here comes from his article entitled "A Divine Summons" which can be found on the website "Radical Discipleship":

(<https://radicaldiscipleship.net/2022/02/07/a-divine-summons/>)

So we are sailing along reading in our Bibles in the Gospel of Matthew and early on in meeting this figure of Jesus who some are already calling the Messiah, we witness his calling out to fishermen in the sea of Galilee. And for this very significant moment it only makes sense for the 21st century reader to try and

understand even a little but about the nature of fishing and the fishing industry in first century Palestine.

When Jesus was growing up and a teenager in Palestine, the Jewish homeland was occupied by Rome which we just heard about in the Christmas story because Mary and Joseph were required by Rome, specifically the emperor Caesar Augustus to go to Bethlehem for taxation. Well, 14 years later in the year 14 of the Common Era Caesar Augustus died and Tiberius became emperor of Rome. Like Caesar Augustus, Tiberius had these local kings of the empire who ruled certain regions and in Judea, the ruler at the time was Herod Antipas, another familiar name to us.

Now when Tiberius took the throne of Rome, Herod had a new city built as an administrative center on the shores of the Sea of Galilee and he called that city Tiberias to curry favor with the emperor. And what was the primary function and industry of that city? It was all about fishing of course. The city and its managers regulated and managed the fishing industry in and around the sea of Galilee because the fishing industry was the most lucrative part of that regions economy and needed to be firmly under control of Rome. So all fishing became state regulated and the real beneficiaries, big surprise here, were the wealthy urban managerial class and the wealthy in further afield lands while the peasant fishermen were exploited and had to eke out a living for themselves while the fruit of their labor was regulated, taxed and exported. Matthew who is writing the Gospel remember was a collector of these taxes and that made him less than popular at the very least.

But the story while old is a familiar and contemporary one. Look no further than rural America and how many of them feel their labor is exploited, their lands

and towns impoverished for the benefit of the city-dwelling liberal elites, at least that's the way its framed for them by politicians who look to take advantage of them and the framing of the situation is not without truth, ask any small time farming family of the mid-west who has lost their farm to massive industrial corporations whose presence benefits not at all the local town but serves the cities far away.

But back to first century Palestine. Jesus grows up in a small town landscape with the fishing industry and a distressed economy because Rome is the occupying force over the Jewish people. So it is a tinder box of struggle and resentment and locally there are all sorts of people with all sorts of responses to what's going on. There are the Jews who go along to get along and even make their living and seek to gain benefit from the Roman empire – the tax collectors are one example. There are other Jews who believe rebellion is the only way to liberate themselves and they want to take up arms to fight the empire. And then there are many common folk just trying to get along and get by, keeping their head down continuing even as that economy makes life harder and harder for as they work in the business their fathers and mothers handed down to them. But not many of them are exactly happy about their lots in life.

So no, this isn't a story about happy go lucky fishermen living idyllic lives out on the beautiful Sea of Galilee and Jesus coming along and convincing them magically to leave it all behind and follow him. No actually, Jesus steps onto the scene and goes right to the restless and frustrated if not resentful peasant fishermen and, as Ched Myers names it, and Jesus begins his movement of dissent, albeit a nonviolent one, to overturn the status quo and offer a new day to the weary ones oppressed by an unjust empire. The fishermen disciples had little

to lose actually and everything to gain by seeking to make a new kingdom with Jesus in the midst of the oppressive Roman empire.

Remember in the Gospel story when Jesus first shows up. On the scene as an adult and he specifically articulates what his mission is about? Remember he doesn't say I've come to save private souls for my heaven. He says, I've come to bring good news to the poor... and he's not speaking metaphorically there at all. He's literally meaning that the kingdom of God is manifesting there and then by showing a way out of injustice, impoverishment and oppression... think Martin Luther King, Jr telling his people I've come to bring good news, not that one day they'll go to heaven, but that they as black people in this country are deserving of dignity and rights and are going to be claiming them, albeit nonviolently. And while there will be opposition, they'll be on the side of justice and righteousness against what is wrong in this country. It's that. That's what Jesus was doing by walking up to the lake side, calling their names, and saying to these fishermen "hey, come follow me!"

So let me give you the clincher evidence for this interpretation that I heard for the first time from Ched Myers. Ready for this So Jesus did not just come up with the "I'll make you fishers of men" statement out of the blue. He's actually making very clear reference to the Jewish prophetic scriptures there. The Jews of his day would have heard him say "Come, follow me and I'll make you fishers of men" and they would have been clear what he was saying, ears perked up, eyebrows raised, maybe even chuckled at it and as they left their boats. What they would have heard would have been the political overtones if not the revolutionary suggestion contained in the statement.

Because Jesus' reference to fishing for men points to three prophetic texts which all concern God's judgment against those who oppress the poor. There's Jeremiah chapter 16 verse 18 where God says through Jeremiah "I will send fishermen to catch the leaders of Israel who have forsaken God's laws, oppressed the poor, and defiled the land." Then there's Amos chapter 4 where Amos, speaking the words of the Lord, warns the elite classes of Israel who oppress the poor and crush the needy that they will be taken away with fishhooks. And in Ezekiel the prophet is told by the Lord to say against Pharaoh – "You are a monster lying amongst your streams, hear this that the Nile belongs to me, the Lord God, I made it for myself and I will put hooks in your jaws and make the fish of your streams stick to your scales and I will pull you out from the streams and leave you in the desert along with all the fish of your streams because you broke the back of my people Israel and oppressed them!"

Do you hear that? Now come with me back to the seaside of Galilee and hear again Jesus calling out to the fishermen and saying "come, follow me and I will send you out to fish for men!" Sounds different now doesn't it? And doesn't it make the way it's always been interpreted sound at the very least a little fishy, like it's someone trying to tame and remove the teeth from the revolution that Jesus was setting off on and inviting the disciples to join him on? It was less like a Billy Graham call to go out and save souls and more like Gandhi's Salt March to nonviolently challenge the status quo and offer a just alternative to current way society was being structured. Why do you think Jesus was killed if he was't a threat to the power structure?

Let me quote from Ched Myer's article directly here:

For Jesus—who not only knew the prophetic literature but sought to *embody* it anew in his context—this “fishers of people”

idiom was a divine summons to working folk to join him in overturning the structures of power and privilege in the world, in order to restore both Creation *and* justice to the poor. In modern parlance, Jesus was calling them—us—“to come help him catch some Big Fish.” Indeed, Luke concludes his story by noting simply that those fishermen “left everything and joined the movement” (5:11).

What if we take what Jesus says at face value and that the good news of the kingdom that he brings is primarily about overturning structures of power and privilege that oppress others in this world? What would that mean for us who for the most part have that power and privilege? It doesn't mean we are bad people for our power and privilege or need to forsake our wealth and power and privilege, necessarily. But it might mean that we need to consider more intentionally how we use our power and privilege to address injustice and poverty and oppressive structures. And that's a call I would add that doesn't just challenge one side of the political divide or the other, but is a call to us all.

So how do we respond?

I don't know, I wish I did know better what that looks like for us here in Winchester in 2023. At the least, I think it means more than putting flags and slogans out on our lawns and feeling like we've done our part. It's gotta mean more than defeating our political opponents and then leaving it to those politicians to figure things out. It's gotta mean more than just keeping our following of Jesus private and personal and just being nicer people because we've worked on some of our psychological issues. It's gotta mean more than requiring people to say the right thing and not say the wrong thing. I don't think any of that is going to hasten the coming of the kingdom all that much actually. Prayer? Yes, but for instance in the face of another mass shooting in CA is praying for them enough? I think what I hear in this passage is that Jesus needs people to join him

who are going to be working harder than that and putting their bodies on the line to hasten the kingdom. Honestly, I'll speak for myself here, it troubles me and I'm afraid the fishy thing going on is how I've swallowed hook, line, and sinker a version of Christianity that is quite comfortable keeping the power structures very well in tact and tidy even though Jesus was committed to something more radical than that. I'm not so sure when I read this passage in full context if I really want to hear what Jesus might truly be asking of me... but he's got bigger fish to fry out there, doesn't he?