

+++ In the Name of Jesus +++

Date: 25 Jan 2026 (3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany, series A)

Title: “Fishing for People”

Text: Matt 4:12-25 (using 18-22)

<sup>18</sup> As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. <sup>19</sup> ‘Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will send you out to fish for people.’ <sup>20</sup> At once they left their nets and followed him.

<sup>21</sup> Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, <sup>22</sup> and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

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Last week, Jesus was surprisingly “passive” in his dealings with the first disciples we saw him collecting in the Gospel of John. Those two guys who started following Jesus, did so pretty much on their own, and he was more interested in asking them what they were looking for, than telling them what he wanted. Today our Gospel reading comes from Matthew, which tells us about the start of that same disciple-making process by focusing on a different incident. Last week, the initiative seemed to be mostly on the disciples’ side. Today, it all belongs to Jesus.

The core of this encounter was simple: Jesus *called* four guys to “**come, follow him.**” One of the reasons some of us turn the ringer off on our cellphones and let everything go to voice-mail is because that’s how calls work—they come at *other* people’s initiative, not ours! Every call we get, *commands* us to set aside whatever it is *we’re* focusing on, and turn toward whatever it is *that* person wants. We’re not in charge anymore—when somebody calls us on the phone *or* when Jesus calls us, the way he does in this reading.

And that’s what Jesus does, to ordinary folks *like* you and me, time and time again, in the Gospels. We don’t know very much about how those calls came into the lives of many of the members of Jesus’s inner circle. But somehow, he broke into the settled pattern of all 12 of his closest followers’ lives—calling them away from their homes and families to “**come, follow him.**”

When you think about it, that’s how God the Father always operated, earlier in the Bible too. God called Moses away from his flock... God called the prophets away from their careers... God called the people of Israel out of Egypt. In every case, *God* was calling *them*, not vice versa—why?—well, probably because he’d *still* be waiting, if it was up to them to reach out to him. Right?

- In Moses’ case, God needed one person to stand up to Pharaoh and tell him, “**Let my people go!**” (Exodus 5:1)
- In the case of the prophets, God needed a handful of people to stand up against their fellow-citizens, and call them out of [what our first reading calls] “**the land of deep darkness.**” (Isaiah 9:2)
- In the case of all Israel, God needed all of his people to tamp down their fear of Pharaoh and trust, instead, that he had both a *plan* to bust them out of “**that land of deep darkness,**” and the *power* to carry out that plan.

In all of those cases (*and* in our case too) a call for volunteers would have fallen on deaf ears! Even when we really do *need* to take God up on his invitation (to leave behind our old ways and “**come,**

**follow him**)—even then, most of us are inclined (because our old sinful nature) to “turn off the ringer” and say, “Sorry, not interested!” *Never volunteer for anything!* (Right?)

Not that we *could* volunteer to “**come, follow Jesus**” anyway—even *if* we wanted to! The Bible shows us (in many ways) that our will is not free, but bound, when it comes to this critical spiritual matter of *leaving* “**the land of deep darkness**” and *entering* God’s kingdom of light. Absolutely, you and I do have free will in all sorts of ordinary things—what socks we pick out of the drawer, what we want for supper, where we go on our holidays (ordinary, everyday stuff like that). But when it comes to *leaving* “**the land of deep darkness,**” and *entering* the kingdom of God, none of us have the capacity to *answer* that call. As Martin Luther says in the Small Catechism, “**I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him.**” The only reason you and I follow Jesus is because “**the Holy Spirit has called us by the Gospel, enlightened us with his gifts**”—and continues to “**sanctify and keep us in the true faith.**” Both that call itself that you and I have received, and our ability to answer that call, come from God—not from us.

What a gift it is, then, *that* Jesus calls! As Isaiah anticipated, centuries before Jesus arrived, “**the people walking in darkness have seen a great light!**” (Isa 9:2) And as soon as that light dawns on any of us, everything changes. “**Come, follow me,**” Jesus calls—and look at that!—Peter and Andrew, James and John, leave it all behind: nets, boats, fish, and families. Granted, *your and my* following might not be quite so dramatic! Very few of *us*, *literally* leave our homes and jobs when the Lord calls us into faith. Maybe that’s *partly* because it was Him who called us *into* those places in life in the first place! *God* brought us and our spouses together... *God* led us to live where we do... and *God* gave us all those functions and roles that we fill, in all the settings in life we serve in. It isn’t really logical, in that sense, to think that the Lord’s call to “**come, follow him**” would instantly or automatically overturn all of that. No: radical change in the outward circumstances of our lives is much more of an exception than a rule, when we notice how most of God’s people have experienced his call over time. The re-alignment that our Saviour calls us to make when we “**come, follow him**” takes place much more on the inside than it does on the outside.

For “inside” is where the real change *needs* to take place—and *does* take place!

- Instead of calling all the shots on our own, the Holy Spirit *moves* us to follow Christ instead.
- Instead of continuing to hold on *tightly* to all the things the world thinks are important, the Holy Spirit *moves* us to “let it all go”—not *necessarily* literally, but in the sense that we come to see those material blessings the Lord entrusts to us as *gifts* that *continue* to belong to him, and ought to be used for *his* service, not just ours.
- In other words (and here’s where we start to shift our focus onto the *second* part of today’s reading): Instead of just fishing for fish, the Holy Spirit calls you and me away from that ordinary goal, to see the greater (and longer-lasting) value of “**fishing for people.**”

What, though, does “**fishing for people**” look like? What does that metaphor mean? Well, if you think of fishing in terms of modern *sport*-fishing, you’re probably going to think of “**fishing for people**” as an individual and pretty aggressive pursuit. Here I am, the great fisherman, rod in hand, matching wits with my wily opponent. If I can find just the right sort of bait to tempt him, or if I can move the lure around in just the right way to trick him, I’ll *hook* him!—and then the battle begins. Can I “play” that fish with enough skill to land him, or is he going to be clever enough to get away?

I don’t know that a lot of us Christians think about “**fishing for people**” *quite* that way, but some of the things that we sometimes hear about sharing our faith really do nudge us in that direction.

Here I am over here... and there you are over there... and it's kind of a "battle of wills" between us, whether I succeed in converting you or not. Am I clever enough, and determined enough, to "land you," or are you going to get the better of me, and get away?

Well, we need to be careful here, don't we. Not only is that style of "**fishing for people**" possible, but some people really do land in "the *boat* of the church," that way. Maybe some of us here today felt like we were being "pursued" by the Lord, through some other Christian who just wouldn't give up on us. They prayed for us... talked to us... helped us... and loved us—in ways that maybe *were* kind of aggressive at times—maybe even confrontational. But eventually, the Holy Spirit "landed us" through that other person, as we came to *hear* God's call to "**come, follow him,**" *through* them. Not *all* Christians come to faith in that way, but *some* do!

At the same time, though, the Lord also works through Christians like you and me in *quieter* and less-dramatic ways as well—less like modern sport-fishing ("one of us *against* one of them"), and more like ancient commercial-fishing (which was much more collective, and less intense). All of the guys Jesus called in today's reading were net-fishermen, not rod-fishermen. As we heard, Peter and Andrew were "**casting a net**" when Jesus said "**Come, follow me.**" (18) James and John were "**preparing their nets**" when Jesus called them. (21)

It's interestingly too that each of those pairs of brothers was using a different kind of net. Peter and Andrew were fishing from the shore, using what Matthew calls "**a casting-net**" (ἀμφιβλήστρον). That was a circular contraption, 6 or 8 metres in diameter, with weights all the way around the rim. When you *cast* that kind of a net, all at once, onto the surface of the water, those weights pulled it down like a parachute, on top of whatever fish happened to be underneath. Maybe you caught some, maybe you didn't. The result of any particular cast depended as much on timing and luck, as on skill.

James and John, on the other hand, were getting ready to fish from a boat, using "**nets**" (in the plural—δίκτυα). That was a totally different, three-ply "*set* of nets" called a "trammel," which was gradually paid out over the side of the boat as it moved slowly along, parallel to the shore. Then, this kind of net just hung there, until fish would (hopefully) swim through one or the other of the outer layers (which had relatively large openings) and get tangled up in the inner layer (which had quite a fine mesh). As they tried to wiggle out of that finer net, they would get more and more tangled up in the outer nets, 'til finally the guys in the boat would have seen all the commotion this made, and pulled that whole set-of-nets in.

Whether you're fishing with a casting-net or a trammel-net, the process is a lot less aggressive than sport-fishing. All you do is cast (or set) your net somewhere you hope some fish might be, and then you wait and see if any of them happen to get caught. For sure, you can try to be more aggressive if you want—but that doesn't usually "net" you better results. (Haha.) I remember using a little scoop-net, years ago, when I wanted to catch some of the Zebra Danios in our aquarium. What a frustrating exercise *that* was! The more I chased them (with my net), the faster they swam, 'til I usually just had to give up, walk away, and try again later, when both they and I had calmed back down. You've got to be patient, when you fish with a net.

"**Fishing for people**" is like that too. Aggression rarely works. The *best* thing we can usually do is just toss our net into the water at what looks like a likely spot, and see what happens. As we were saying before, it's the Lord who calls, not us who volunteer—and (translating that principle into *fishing*) it's the Lord who brings fish into our net, not us who hustle out there and chase those fish around. That's why "**fishing for people**" often feels so fruitless! There's *nothing* we can do, to *force* fish into our net (or people into our church). Remember how all of that played out for the fishermen we

hear about, at the every end of John's Gospel? They'd been fishing all night with their trammel-net, which probably meant paying it out and pulling it in as many as 10 or 15 times. And they had caught absolutely nothing. It wasn't until Jesus showed up—early in the morning, just as they were “packing it all in”—that they finally came up with a catch. And the reason they *got* that tremendous catch (“**153 large fish,**” John tells us) was because Jesus told them where to let down the net. Until *he* intervened, their fishing was fruitless. (John 21:3-6, 11)

So it is with a lot of the “fishing” we as God's people do today, here on the shore of the Salish Sea. All we can do is try to figure out *when* and *where* to let down *our* nets—then “wait and see” how many fish the Lord leads into them. Even here in worship, we try to “let down the net” in slightly different ways, from week to week. Sometimes we use an order of service straight out of the hymnal; more often, we use a blended liturgy. Sometimes we sing a lot of time-tested hymns; sometimes we learn new songs. How much of a “harvest” are we going to get, any given time? We don't know! We just keep on setting the net, as well as we can, time after time. We trust the Lord to fill it.

It's the same, when you think about it, with everything we do here in this church, as pastor and people together. Our leaders put their heads together at council meetings (for instance), and say to each other, “Look at all these opportunities we have, to put down our nets in all these different places.” We could do this... we could do that... we could do something else again! Sometimes there are more places we *could* go fishing in, than we have nets for. Sometimes we've got more nets than fishermen. So, what are our priorities? Where, when, and how are we going to use our nets? Always, we hope and pray that the Lord will *fill* those nets, by calling other people, too, to leave “**the land of deep darkness,**” and come with us into the light of God's grace.

*Never* can we do it all—not as individuals, nor as a congregation. But the Lord's call (“**Come, follow me**”) has entered our ears. It has changed our hearts. It has led us to trust Jesus, our Saviour. It has moved us to follow him.

So, those things we *can* do, we *want* to do—right?—individually *and* together.

Brothers and sisters: “Let's go fishin'.”

In the name of Jesus: AMEN.