

A Sermon for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany

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The Rev. Robin Teasley

*After John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.* Mark 1:14-20

When Paul and I were first married and our children were young, we had a freshwater aquarium. We were so good at controlling it that we boldly moved into the world of saltwater aquariums. Saltwater aquariums are more difficult to maintain and control. There are even more variables to monitor, and the fish are more beautiful and fragile and all of them are valuable.

Aquariums are tiny microcosms of the world, contained ecosystems that we attempt to control. We can create this beautiful, watery environment, but it requires a good bit of attention, careful planning, and management to maintain an aquarium. It's all a balancing act. If the temperature is too hot or too cold, the fish will die. The algae must be scraped off the glass, the gravel must be vacuumed, the pH of the water must be monitored, and the fish themselves must be carefully selected so they don't become territorial in such a small space. They must be "compatible", or the smaller ones will be eaten! As long as we remained attentive and in control of the aquarium, things were fine.

Before long though, we realized that we were spending way too much time and money on our aquarium and it was preventing us from doing other things. It was no longer a joy but a drain on our time and resources. Working to control even so small an environment was stressful, and eventually we let go of our need to control an aquarium.

Controlling God's kingdom is so much more complicated than aquarium care. We mistakenly believe that we're in control when all along God is the aquarium keeper, and we are the fish. Beautiful, fragile, valuable fish. Fish that will learn to school together or fight one another for the territory.

Sometimes we want to make the Church into an aquarium we can control. The business of being the Church is not always clean, nice looking, or within our comfort zone, especially in a pandemic. Hearing and responding to God's call to us individually is not always easy either. Whether God is calling us to a major life or career change, calling us to be more forgiving and inclusive of others, or to personally give up something we know deep inside is harmful to us, God is calling. And God will not stop calling at home or at church.

Last week we heard about Samuel, who needed some help from Eli to answer God's call. We heard about Philip who was very willing, and Nathanael who was skeptical as they answered God's call. Today we have Jonah, *not* so willing, the Ninevites *more* than willing, and four more disciples who are *immediately* willing to answer God's call. All of these children of God are so much like us as we seek to hear and respond to God's call. It's not always easy, perhaps because much of our response becomes tangled in the nets of our own personal lives. The nets we are so dependent on to help us stay in control of our lives, are the very ones that we are reluctant to put down when God calls. We love the comfort of our boats and are not inclined to leave them behind.

Hearing these call stories today, we may ask ourselves if we could possibly measure up to the standards of those first followers; if we could drop everything when God calls us. Because, honestly, aren't we more like Jonah sometimes, avoiding God's call or so upset about something to the extent that we run away entirely?

But what if we see that these stories are not primarily about those disciples or about us? What if these stories are about God? What if they are about the power of God, as priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor says, "the power of God to walk right up to a quartet of fishermen and work a miracle, creating faith where there was no faith, creating disciples where there were none just a moment before."<sup>1</sup> These stories are about a God of so much grace, that there is mercy for an entire city of people when they repent and return to the Lord. They are about a God of so much love that Jonah is given as many chances as he needs to believe that God is both merciful and just.

God never left Jonah's side, no matter how stubborn he got, over and over inviting him to be part of his plan of salvation. Jesus met the disciples where they were, on the beach with their nets and in the boat with their father. He invited those fishermen to follow him, but more than that he called them to be who they were created to be. We don't have to become someone or something that we aren't in order to follow Jesus. The disciples called in today's gospel were fishermen. Jesus just as easily calls carpenters to be builders of the kingdom, artists to paint the kingdom, doctors and nurses to help heal the kingdom, and teachers to teach about the kingdom. Jesus calls us to all kinds of work, using the gifts and talents we have been given to bring the kingdom near to all. Jesus calls us to follow, to proclaim, and to serve.

To respond to this call may mean that we have some nets to put down, or some boats to step out of. We may need to stop our futile attempt to control our own lives or the lives of others. We may need to get out of our controlled aquarium environments, which might look like letting go of old habits, old ways of doing things. There may be people we need to forgive or be more compassionate towards.

Perhaps God is calling us to try something new, to be willing to change, to be open to adventures we did not think possible. Working without our old nets or stepping out of the boat we have been so comfortable in for so long is not easy. It requires radical trust and an ability to give up our need for control. As God reminded Jonah, it is *divine power* and not our own that enables us to do what we are called to do.

The Church is always being called to drop some nets and follow Jesus. The pandemic has only revealed this more fully. As we continue to move through these challenges and into the future, we will have to let go of some old nets to keep following Jesus. The good news is that God knows all of this, knows us in our innermost being, loves us deeply and completely, and will be there to catch us when we trust enough to step out of our boats in faith.

Are we willing to follow Jesus away from the nets which entangle us – our fears, doubts, and insecurities, our grudges and resentments – to more fully live in the kingdom that has come near? For it is only when we let go that we will no longer be keepers of an aquarium, but fishers of people. Fishers of people who are also beautiful, fragile, valuable children of God.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way*, p 40.