

Sermon – “Casting a Wide Net”

Sunday, January 22, 2023

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 9:1-4, Matthew 4:12-23

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Our first scripture reading is Isaiah 9, verses 1-4. Toward the end of the exile for the Israelites the ancient prophet uses the metaphor of light to proclaim the coming of God. In this new presence their lives would not be taken “lightly”—trivialized. In this new light, they would be taken seriously restoring their dignity and well-being—a cause for great joy. Hear now God’s word.

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time God brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time God will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.*

*You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder.
For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. Amen.*

Our second scripture reading, Matthew 4:12-23, highlights the light metaphor in Isaiah to introduce the ministry of Christ. Matthew’s tracing of Jesus’ travels is not merely a travelogue but a theological statement. By beginning along the Sea of Galilee, the land of the Gentiles, we are reminded *the kingdom of God* welcomes all people. In God’s new presence, all life is glorified and taken seriously—lives that were trivialized by the contempt of the religious elite are not only taken seriously but also glorified, restoring their dignity and well-being—a cause for great joy. For Peter, Andrew, James, and John it was a cause worthy of changing the direction of their lives. Leaving behind their fishing net to cast the wide net of God’s grace, they followed Jesus. Hear now the Word of God

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴ so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James, son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. Amen.

The title of the sermon: “Casting a Wide Net”

The text: “Immediately they left their nets and followed him. Matthew 4:20

Let us pray. Gracious God, thank you for calling each of us in the wideness of your mercy. Help us never to take ourselves so seriously that we trivialize the experience of others. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable to you, our Light and Salvation. Amen.

Norman Maclean wrote about growing up with his brother Paul on Montana’s Big Blackfoot River in a short story which later became a film entitled “The River Runs Through It.” He shares memories of their father (a Presbyterian minister and fly fisherman) who tied his own flies and who drew parallels between the art of fly fishing and the art of faith. He writes:

Dad told us about Christ’s disciples being fishermen, and we were left to assume that all first-class fishermen on the Sea of Galilee were fly fishermen and that John, the favorite, was a dry-fly fisherman. As dad buttoned his glove (on his casting hand) in preparation to giving us a lesson, he would say, “It is an art that is performed on a four-count rhythm between ten and two o’clock.” Our father was very sure about certain matters pertaining to the universe. To him, all good things—trout as well as eternal salvation—come by grace and grace comes by art and art does not come easy. So, my brother and I learned to cast Presbyterian-style, on a metronome.

Like Norman and Paul Maclean, many of us picture these first disciples fishing with rods. The truth is Andrew and Peter were not fly fishermen and John was not a dry-fly fisherman.

Several methods of fishing are noted in the Bible However, there is no mention of a fishing rod. There were two types of fishnets. One was thrown by hand usually while the fisherman was standing on the shore. Perhaps Peter and Andrew used this method, while the sons of Zebedee used the dragnet. A larger net used from the boats and operated like a sieve from a circle of boats closing into one another.”

And so, when Jesus asked these fishermen to follow him he chose a metaphor from their life and work, which he knew they would understand because they had emmersed themselves in the art of fishing. It was their livelihood. It was their world. They knew how hard the work was and the skills needed to do the work well. So did Jesus. By meeting them in their world and speaking their language Jesus not only affirmed their work as fishermen he also doesn’t cut them any slack. The new task to which they are called will be equally difficult and require skills to do the work well.

In this encounter with Andrew and Peter, James, and John we experience part of the richness of Jesus’ teaching ministry. He met people where they were and spoke about the “kingdom of heaven” in ways they could understand. His teachings are full of metaphors from everyday life in first century Palestine.

The fish metaphor, however, took on a life of its own for the early followers of Christ. During the later part of the first century and the second century Christians were persecuted, and the Christian community was forced underground. The symbol of the fish drawn discreetly on the road with one’s sandal was how they communicated who they were to one another. The letters

of the Greek word for fish, “ichthus” are an acronym for the early Christian confession: “Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, my Lord and Savior.” During high school and college, I wore the symbol of the fish as a necklace to affirm my personal confession.

When Jesus used the metaphor of fishing, he didn’t have the image of the fishhook or rod in mind as if they were to hunt people down and reel them in unknowingly. Jesus saw his future disciples along the Sea of Galilee catching fish by casting a wide net, and he foresaw these capable young fishermen likewise gathering people from all walks of life, especially those whose lives were not in the mainstream of society and whose lives were trivialized. Jesus envisioned a net as wide as God’s mercy, a net broad enough to gather all who respond, and a net sufficiently mended so that no one will slip through the torn places.

Jesus saw these young fishermen mending the nets they cast and he envisioned his future disciples healing lives that are torn apart by life’s rough places, wear and tear, conflict, and tragedy. Jesus knew that mending nets is tedious and detailed work, and that this mending takes time and a disciplined spirit. Likewise, Jesus foresaw how lives damaged by neglect and circumstance could be repaired and restored to the wholeness intended for each one of God’s children.

The good news of the kingdom which Jesus proclaimed is that God values and respects each one of us. Even as Jesus met the fishermen by the Sea of Galilee, he meets us in our life situation without trivializing or taking lightly our beings. There is no burden too heavy, no sorrow or despair too deep, no emptiness too wide for the breadth and depth and width of God’s love and mercy.

When we are swept up in the sea of life’s unpredictable circumstances, the wide net of God’s mercy gathers us in and gives us a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven. As citizens’ worthy of this kingdom, we are called to embrace a new set of values within our relationships. With Andrew, Peter, James, and John we are called to follow the teachings of Jesus, to learn the rhythm and art of a grace filled life, and to cast wide nets of inclusivity in all that we do. This is not easy but is learned over time with discipline, practice, and love.

When we start to move beyond our own self-interest and learn to value and respect the experience of one who is different without judging or feeling superior, when we stop trivializing the pain of others because we do not understand or are afraid of our own pain and instead reach out in compassion, then we indeed have learned the rhythm and art of a grace-filled life.

Celebrating the wideness of God’s mercy and Christ, whose glory fills the sky, let us continue the difficult and disciplined work of mending broken lives and casting wide nets. Amen.

Benediction:

And now, let us go into the world in peace, cast your net wide, have courage, hold on to what is right, return no one evil for evil, strengthen the fainthearted, support the weak, help the suffering. Honor everyone. And may the *God of Zebulun and Naphtali*, the God who is the light and salvation of all people, bless you, keep you, and strengthen you, day by day.