

Isaiah 9:1-14 ~ Matthew 4:12-23

Follow Me

January 26, 2020 ~ 3rd Sunday after Epiphany ~ Infant Baptism

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Introduction to Scripture:

The story you are about to hear is a bridge story. It's how Matthew gets Jesus from his forty days in the desert of being tempted by the devil, to the crowds on the mountain where he delivers his "Sermon on the Mount." On the surface, it looks pretty simple: Jesus goes to Galilee, calls his first four disciples, they join up with him, he starts doing his thing: teaching, preaching, healing. Typical Messiah stuff. Yeah Jesus. We got this one. Let's go home.

We could leave it there. But if we did, we would miss the message that pulses just under the storyline. We might miss how edgy this whole story is. We might not notice how much our God loves impossible odds. Our God who picks the most unlikely places and most unlikely people to be on Team Jesus.

What am I talking about? Let's start with "Zebulun and Naphtali." You probably didn't wake up wondering about "Zebulun and Naphtali." And if you are like me, you may have let your mind skip over those unusual and foreign sounding names to get to the story part. But here's the thing, if you do, you will miss a tip off to the very grounding of Jesus life and work, hidden to most of us Gentiles, in those place names.

If you look at a map of Galilee in Jesus' time, you can look and look: but you won't find Zebulun or Naphtali. They aren't there. The captivity and destruction of Zebulun and Naphtali by the Assyrians 700 years earlier was so traumatic, their names had been wiped off the maps and were no longer used or spoken. They were the first two tribes of Israel to be captured. This loss was too terrible and terrifying to talk about. The very land and soil of deep darkness, the geographical heart of this soul-wound is this very spot where Jesus chose to plant himself, The spot where "he made his home" to begin his life-turning, world-changing work.

One other set up piece I want to point out, besides the edginess of it being literally set where land and sea connect, where Jews and Gentiles both were living is the one I missed until very recently. It is the verb "withdrew" in the first sentence. Matt. 4:12 reads: "Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee." Jesus didn't just go to Galilee or depart to Galilee. He "withdrew." Yes, he was already on the run needing to evade notice. Why? He was given word that John the Baptist had been arrested by Herod Antipas for speaking truth to power. And John, whom we know was consequently beheaded, was just the forerunner. John was the warm-up band for Jesus' message. Matthew signals to us here that Jesus' ministry from day one, was under threat and suspicion by the powers that be. And yet, he persisted. For you and for me and for this whole broken down world.

Yes, this one dark-skinned, sandal-blistered, Jewish son of a carpenter, withdrew to the Sea of Galilee, the territory once known as Zebulun and Naphtali, to begin his edgy work.

Sermon:

You may have heard the story about the day when Michelangelo, the great sculptor, was pushing a huge rock down a street and a neighbor, sitting on his porch observed him, struggling to move this heavy, awkward, gigantic rock. So the neighbor called out and asked him why he was laboring so painfully over just an old slab of stone. Michelangelo is reported to have answered, "Because there is an angel in that rock that wants to come out."

Michelangelo could see something beautiful, something exquisite inside of this plain, ugly slab of stone. Something his neighbor could not see. Did you ever wonder what God sees when God looks at each of us? Or what God sees, in us together here at FPC? When **we** look around the sanctuary this morning, what do we see? Familiar faces, new faces, tired faces, anxious faces, hungry faces, dejected end of the Packer's season faces. I'm here to tell you: God sees more. Inside each of us are talents—gifts from God yet to be discovered, claimed and developed.

Yes: we have unknown potential, large quantities of it—sitting in these pews (and choir loft) just waiting to be chiseled into shape, to be reshaped into the messengers of love and grace that we were created to become. And we have an invitation to help usher in a new reality. We can be God's angels, of a new and *better* way, Jesus' way of risking everything to call us to REPENT. Jesus deploying all of us "to go beyond the mind we have", to help get us unstuck! So that together we can move forward on the road to love one another, as Jesus loves us.

What does Jesus do to get started? Jesus went out to the sea, he went to the fishermen, while they were on the job. That's the kind of Messiah God sent to us. Out to the edge. Where land and sea, where Jew and Gentile, where rich and poor converge. Jesus comes not only breaking in to earth, but closer. Jesus comes to our desks, our kitchens, our garages, hunting blinds, Jesus calls to us from our smart phones, our Twitter accounts, saying, "Follow me!"

Jesus makes the first move. That's why we baptized Samuel Rodney today. That's why we encourage infant baptism. This is one of the ways we acknowledge this amazing this simple truth which can take a lifetime to really feel: We were made perfectly and beautifully in God's image. Every one of us. God loves us beyond what we could possibly understand or feel. And God loves us first. Jesus comes to us. Jesus makes the invitation, the call, "Follow me...and I can get you unstuck. Follow me and your angel in the rock can begin to emerge." I believe this goes for a system or an institution that is stuck. Against all odds: whether it be a marriage, a church, a township, or even our congress. The way of Divine Love, Divine justice can and will win if we find a way to work together responding to this love. That's what this cross, this communion table, this baptismal font is are about. Consider them God's chisel tools ready to do their artistic work on each of us and our church body.

Let's get back to the shores of Galilee and the story of the four fishermen. You know the part, when Jesus says, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people. Immediately they left

their nets and followed him." He did this twice, the second time we hear explicitly about James and John leaving their dad Zebedee, with their broken nets to carry on somehow without his sons. The older I get, the more sympathetic I feel for Zebedee. But that is not the important point in the story then or now, except for perhaps some of the reality of sacrifice involved in letting go. But we can gain access to the bigger story, by considering who they were fishing for to begin with. Jesus called them into his work of saving the world. But when they were in those boats casting nets, mending nets, most of their earnings went to taxes and to Caesar. They were stuck as cogs in a system of injustice and exploitation. Jesus called them, opened the door for them to no longer be stuck in that system of unfair exploitation. Jesus call to let go their old livelihood behind was a leap and a release. Jesus' call can release souls of individuals and souls of systems. No matter how big that rock or system may seem

Jumping from the shores of Galilee, to the shores of Lake Dubay yesterday. Our very own Dan Crump and his dog Tabitha, got literally stuck at the bottom of the icy hill of our neighbor's driveway on his way to the six-hour retreat our Outreach Committee just had yesterday at our home on Lake Dubay. Later our neighbor freed his car, and prepared our driveway so all could be freed from our long retreat at the appointed time. (I will have to tell our neighbor Barry, that I put him in the role of Jesus just in this sermon.) We also had a member get locked out of her own house. And still, she made it to this meeting. She would not let a series of unfortunate events keep her stuck and unable to attend. Beside two of the six being stuck and then unstuck, as Jesus does for us, my larger point is to share the how we were able to move forward as a committee. Not stuck, rather spending time considering the outreach mission of the church. We ended the retreat by talking about how the outreach of FPC aims to do two things: to "salve" and to "solve" problems related to poverty and racism. We pondered the joy of being a vital congregation. And the joy of being a congregation that refuses to be stuck. Ready to let Jesus do the chiseling work on us. Jesus showed us the way to get unstuck: Sometimes it's to salve, other times its to take a chisel to systemic problems. Jesus is calling us.

My final against all odds getting unstuck story is one you may have heard this week. 8 father's and 1 mother who were deported unlawfully at the border and separated from their children in 2017 and 2018 were reunited with their children at the Los Angeles airport. One was Fernando whose daughter was 5 at the time of separation and is now 7. These souls that were living in deep darkness were salved with those hugs and tears and return into each other's arms. Thanks be to God. And thanks to the host of angels who helped this to happen. One of the organizations our Reunir bracelet campaign supports had a hand in bringing these families back together. But there are still more parents stuck in detention centers. Still more children far from their parents. Jesus is calling us. Calling us out of the shadow of the rock.

What are you feeling stuck about today? What is dragging you down? Let Jesus lead you to "repent" in the sense of "going beyond the mind you have." Let Jesus teach you, lead you so that you can be freed from habits of mind that feed on self-doubt, second guessing, giving up. We can do that work best, together. Jesus needed disciples. We need each other. I hear the chisel sounds against the rock. Jesus is calling to us, clapping for us, as we baptize, as we sing,

as we together go beyond the mind we have. As we help make a better world, a kinder world, the world that Jesus made his home in, beginning in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. The place where he would begin to show the way out of deep darkness and into the new light of grace upon grace.