

**They Left the Boat**  
**A Sermon by Louise Westfall**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**Cleveland Heights, Ohio**  
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**Text: Matthew 4:12-23**

Sometimes the most profound change, the decision that viewed in retrospect became the turning point, a choice that upsets the equilibrium of your whole life, begins with a simple invitation:

*Will you marry me?*

*How about applying for this position?*

*Could you do this?*

Sometimes the question is put to you after a long time of preparation; of schooling or training or building a friendship. When the call comes, you sense you are as ready as you'll ever be. It just feels right. But sometimes the call comes out of the blue. Boom! Who could have guessed? Perhaps circumstance, being in the right place at the right time, or some mysterious providence sets you on a new path toward a future beyond what may be seen or even imagined.

I wonder if this is how it might have been for the first disciples of Jesus. Here they are, busy with their lives, when along comes this young teacher, a local man who had caused something of a stir with his bold preaching and powerful healing. He approaches them and without fanfare invites them to follow. Listen for God's call to you in the reading from the gospel according to Matthew in the fourth chapter at the 12<sup>th</sup> verse [Matthew 4:12-25]

*Wanted: Strong men for perilous adventure; low pay, good companions, return uncertain.* With this employment ad, explorer Ernest Shackleton got a crew of hearty men whose amazing Antarctica adventure is breathtakingly portrayed in a film that played until recently at the Great Lakes Science Center's Omnimax Theater. I confess that until I saw it, I didn't know much about Shackleton's daring dream to traverse the entire continent of Antarctica, plans that were dashed when his ship became locked in unyielding ice, or about the incredible journey he took to save the lives of the crew. The men who answered that ad couldn't have known what they were getting into. They bet their lives against little more than their confidence in Shackleton, their own strength and wit, and no doubt the thrill of being part of such an enterprise.

The gospel narrative describing the call of Jesus' first disciples holds similar drama in the lack of tantalizing detail. Even if we conclude that Andrew and Peter, James and John had encountered Jesus prior to their

lakeshore invitation, his call to them was wide and non-specific. *Follow me and I will make you fish for people.* Jesus didn't tell them what they were going to do, where they were going to go, or what the outcome might be. He didn't outline the sacrifices they might have to make or the qualifications he was looking for in a crew. Just, "Follow me." And something moved those men "immediately" to leave their boats and ordered lives and head out for perilous adventure with good companions on a journey from which they never really did return.

This week I've been asking people about the invitations they've received and accepted. Some spoke of a marriage proposal; others of various job offers; one person mentioned a risky midlife career change; someone else told about a call from the Nominating Committee inviting him to become an elder in this church. The question took me back to a night some four years ago, and a conversation with people I knew only slightly, talking about a pastoral position in a church I'd visited only once, sitting there wondering, *Could this be my call?*

Friends, our God is the God of invitations. The One we worship and serve calls you and me. Calls us to follow the way of Christ; calls us to believe, calls us to do, calls us to go, calls us to leave home for a life we can't foresee. God calls us all, though we may be unaware of it. I've always envied the character in my all-time favorite movie, *Field of Dreams*. From out of his Iowa corn rows comes a voice whose invitation sets him on an amazing journey of discovery, and ultimately of redemption and reconciliation with his long-dead father. But not many of us will receive an audible call from the Divine. We won't get skywriting or a message in a bottle. But I believe God "speaks" to us as part of God's covenant promise: *I will be your God and you will be my people.* If we are attentive, we discover that God doesn't dictate...God invites. God doesn't demand...God calls.

How can you and I perceive it? Well, I think it may begin by doing what you are doing right now: worshiping God and listening for God's Word to us today. Through reading the Bible and learning to apply its ancient wisdom in contemporary life. Through prayer or other meditative practices such as yoga. More than one of you has described a period in your life when you felt restless, anxious, or unsettled—and in addressing that, found a new path. I believe God may speak to us through experiences of heartache and loss, those awful times when the world we knew disappears, and we fear we will ever walk in darkness. And just as truly I believe God speaks to us through experiences of exhilaration, when our joy can barely be constrained. God's voice may often be heard through the voice of a human messenger, painting a vision, issuing a call. And yes, I believe God's call may come to you and me through the vote of

a committee—a phone call from Jim Roberts, perhaps, inviting you to become an elder or deacon or trustee, or from Paulo Franca asking you to work with our middle-school youth.

*Follow me and I will make you fish for people.* So Jesus called, and still calls. At the heart of it is a call to discipleship; an invitation to align our lives with Jesus' teaching and example and leadership. Follow me, he said, and James and John, Peter and Andrew certainly did not fully comprehend what they were getting into when they did. Neither do we. The call to those first disciples is followed immediately by a description of their early days: traveling with Jesus, at his side while he taught and proclaimed the good news of God's kingdom, and cured every disease and sickness among the people. Could they have anticipated that as long as they stayed in the relative security of their fishing boats, tending their nets and net worth?

And where will Jesus lead us, if we follow? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the young German theologian arrested and eventually martyred during the Nazi regime for his singular loyalty to God and not the Fuehrer, pondered this question in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*:

*If we answer the call to discipleship, where will it lead us? What decisions and partings will it demand? To answer this question, we shall have to go to him, for only he knows the answer. Only Jesus Christ, who bids us follow him, knows the journey's end. But we do know it will be a road of boundless mercy. Discipleship means joy. [Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R.H. Fuller (London: SCM Press, 1959, p. 32)]*

Bonhoeffer knew better than most what cost might be required for following Jesus. Perhaps he also understood better than most the amazing grace and ineffable joy of such a journey. Our way may not take us to such a clear-cut precipice of choice, a matter of life and death. And yet in a way it always is. Though Jesus' invitation is annoyingly short on details, he gave us the broad outline in his own ministry, death, and resurrection. *Follow me, and find the way to real life.*

Where did we ever get the idea that the life of discipleship is for wimps and needy people? It's a risky way, that will have us doing things we never thought possible. It will take us places we would never go otherwise. It will demand the very best that is in each of us, and all of us together. We may doubt that we are up to it; that we are qualified or "good" enough. And frankly sometimes I do marvel that God places the sacred task of transformation into human hands. But I am heartened by

the truth embedded in the saying that "God does not call the equipped; God equips the called."

Which is to say, God will give us the skills, the wisdom, the strength, the love to accomplish that to which God calls us. We'll never know, until we say yes. Until we leave our boats and follow.

I do think it's possible to grow gradually into your new life. But I think for most if not all of us, there will be specific moments when the question is put to us and we are confronted with a choice. Some have spoken of it as "a leap of faith," where one comes to the end of rational thought, of planning and preparation, of checking one's schedule, of examining the blueprint; when one simply says, "Yes. Okay. I'll do it."

Is there a place in your life right now where you are at a crossroads? Maybe it's only the faint rumbling of a change that may come later. Maybe you feel restless with the way things are in your life, or uncertain about your next step. Or maybe you sense what God is calling you to do, and you're afraid you just can't go there. Still, you never know what abundant life you might be living, what great faith you might be growing, what unimaginable adventures you may be in for....until you follow.

*Wanted: Strong men and women for perilous adventure. Low pay; return uncertain; good companions. The opportunity of a lifetime.*

**NOW TO THE ONE WHO BY THE POWER AT WORK WITHIN US IS ABLE TO ACCOMPLISH ABUNDANTLY FAR MORE THAN ALL WE ASK OR IMAGINE, TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH TO ALL GENERATIONS, FOREVER AND EVER. AMEN.**

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