

Isaiah 9:1-4
1 Corinthians 1:10-18
Matthew 4:12-23
Psalm 27:1, 5-13

The Third Sunday after Epiphany
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
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Called to Relationship

If you go to Galilee today, you can see a boat that might have belonged to Simon and Andrew, or perhaps to James, John and their father. I've seen it. It's a real boat, discovered deep in the thick mud of the Sea of Galilee one year when there was a drought so severe that the Galilean waters receded further than they ever had before. The wood of the boat, its nails, shards of pottery from a cooking pot and a lantern have all been carbon dated to somewhere in the timeframe of 50 BC to 50 AD. Of course, that is precisely the timeframe when Jesus walked along the Galilean seashore... precisely the time he encountered Simon and Andrew and James and John. And whether or not that little boat actually belonged to those particular fishermen, it is surely just like the boats they left behind when they encountered Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Being in the Holy Land is stunning. Walking in the places Jesus walked, standing on the hillside where he preached those beautiful beatitudes, praying in the places he lived and died are just a few of the many "holy" experiences I had there. But seeing that boat was a very different kind of "holy" experience for me. When I saw that boat, all I could think about was the very real lives of those first followers.

They were fishermen – people who made their living through hard, but steady work, people who were able to care for their families not in any sort of extravagant way, but well enough to feel safe and secure and to hope for an even better future. They were all in the family business, and they counted on each other to shoulder the load, and to share in whatever small fortune came to them. And while the catch wasn't always predictable, I imagine their lives were pretty predictable. Well, at least until Jesus showed up. I guess that's how it is for us too... we have our fairly predictable and well managed lives – at least until Jesus shows up.

When Jesus met up with Simon and Andrew and James and John, he called them away from their very real boats, their very real nets, their very real lives. He called them in to something totally unexpected and unknown. And what utterly astounds me, is that they went with him. I don't know about you, but when I think about that very real boat submerged in the mud of the Sea of Galilee, and those very real men who just went to work one morning hoping for an excellent catch, it's hard to imagine that they would just up and leave everything – -EVERYTHING- to follow a man who claimed they'd become fishers of people rather than fishers of fish. Except that it was Jesus. And while they had no idea how it would all turn out, I don't even think they had any idea of who Jesus really was, still, they dropped everything. Really, EVERYTHING. And they followed.

On a recent walk... a walk by the sea... not the sea of Galilee but our very own Salish Sea, I found myself talking with a friend who is thinking about pursuing an entirely new vocation, even – as she would say – at her advanced age. There will be training involved and changes involved and it all feels terribly inconvenient, and still, she can't stop thinking about it. So I told her the story of my own vocational change, a vocational change I made at just about the age she is. My friend marveled at the fact that I had left a pretty lucrative job with a six minute commute to an office that overlooked the Winslow Wharf Marina, then across the waters of the Sound and on beyond to the Cascade mountain range, a job running a research institute that did good work with good people, where I worked four days a week and was in charge of everything but the science.

"How could you do it," she asked me? "I mean really, how could you leave your home and your job and your decades-long life on Bainbridge Island and move to a noisy and tiny apartment with no windows in the kitchen?" "I was called." I answered. And it really was as simple as that. I don't mean that the move was simple or that the leaving was simple or that the apartment living was simple, it wasn't. And lest you be lulled into thinking I'm the perfect example of a disciple if you've been in church lately, you've heard me talk about how awful I felt, and how badly I wanted to turn around and come home. But I couldn't do that. I needed to stay, and I knew it. It was very hard. But I could do it. And I did do it. I did it by the grace of the God who loves me and who called me into a life that was richer and more glorious than anything I ever could have asked or imagined. This God called me into a life of ever deepening relationship, not just with God, but with all the people I encounter, and particularly the people with whom I serve.

I hadn't any idea that I would be back here on Bainbridge Island with all of you when I set out for Berkeley. What I did know was that God wanted abundant life for me, and that if I surrendered, I might just get to have that abundant life. And I do. I love this life, this work more than anything I could ever have imagined. And I think the reason I love it so much is because the life I've been called into always brings me more deeply into relationship – relationship with God, and relationship with you. I gave up a lot to have this life, but what I gave up doesn't hold a candle to the gifts I've been given.

You see, I don't actually believe that God calls us out of our lives into some strange or unrecognizable life, into a life that is counter to our own unique and God-given natures. I believe God calls us into new life, into life richer and deeper and far more abundant than anything we could ever even think up. It isn't always easy. Actually, it's often NOT easy. Yet once we've decided to respond to God's call, there really is no turning back. We may well lose things when respond to God's call to us, things like prestige or power or money or control, or the illusion of being right. But what we gain – what we gain far surpasses anything lost.

Think about those fishermen on the beach. "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." Follow me and I will make you disciples. Follow me into the Messianic community. Follow me and we will be the church. And with those words, Jesus spoke the church into being. By calling those very ordinary men in the midst of their very ordinary lives to do something extraordinary... Jesus spoke the church into being.

Do you see what is happening? Jesus sees these men, really sees them. They are fishermen. And when Jesus tells them they will fish for people, he's recognizing who they really are, not who he wishes they would be, not who they might have been, not even who they could be if they were at their best. Jesus used the gifts of four very ordinary fishermen to begin the church. He didn't do that by calling them to be ambassadors for the kingdom, didn't do it by calling them to start a new church, he didn't even call them to be disciples. He called them to be people fishers. He called them into relationship. Not into work, not into new jobs, not into evangelism, but into relationship. Relationship with God, relationship with one another, relationship with everyone they would encounter on their incredible journey with Jesus. "Follow me," he had said to perfect strangers the first time they met... and on their last night together, he called them his friends.

Jesus called those ordinary people, right smack in the middle of their ordinary lives, to be extraordinary, simply by calling them into relationship. It's the way he calls us too. We aren't necessarily called to leave our homes or our jobs or our families, but we are all called into relationships that are rich and real and honest and transparent and tender and vulnerable and true. We are all called share each other's joys and heartaches, and to be with one another through it all. We are all called to share the load and to share in whatever small or large fortune comes our way. Just like Simon and Andrew and James and John on the beach, God calls us into real relationships with all the people we encounter as we journey through life with Jesus.

I think we often wonder what God is calling us to do, and that is a fine question to hold in mind and heart. But I wonder what would happen, what would change for us, if rather than asking ourselves "What is God calling me to do?" we asked ourselves "Who is God calling me into relationship with?" It's a more difficult question, isn't it? It is so much easier to do stuff than it is to be deeply relational. But God is always calling us more deeply into relationship – not in the abstract, but in our very real lives. So I wonder, where is God calling you into more authentic relationship, and with whom?

Is it someone at work?

Is it a family member who troubles you?

Is it the man you see at the T&C parking lot entrance or the scared and sad kid outside of Safeway?

Is it your spouse?

Your child?

Your congressperson?

Your neighbor?

Is it someone at church?

God calls us in so very many ways, but God's call is always the call to relationship. We are God's own beloveds – we have been called children of God. Just like John the Baptist, just like Andrew and Peter and James and John, we are beloved children of God called to make God's love known to everyone we encounter. You see, when we know ourselves to be God's own beloved, when

we believe that God really will use what might feel like our very ordinary gifts, when we recognize that it isn't what we do but who we are that changes the world, well, we too will have answered God's call to follow. Amen