

January 22, 2023 - Isaiah 9:1-4, Matthew 4:12-23

Pr. Maria Anderson-Lippert

"Dropping Our Nets"

First Reading: Isaiah 9:1-4

1There will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time [the Lord] brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

2The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

3You 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.

4For 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.

Gospel: Matthew 4:12-23

12Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. 13He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, 14so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

15"Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—

16the 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."

17From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

18As 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. 19And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." 20Immediately they left their nets and followed him. 21As 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. 22Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

23Jesus 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.

I have to admit that I've always been a cat person. For many years as a child I was convinced I was more of a dog person - probably because I lived with dog people and I was quite allergic to cats - but there's this picture of me as a little girl - probably around 3 years old - holding two kittens - one in each hand and grinning from ear to ear. Needless to say, the kittens do not look very comfortable. That picture is proof of what has been true all along - I actually prefer cats. It's not that I don't like dogs, it's just that they're often really big and they lick your face and you have to take them outside and on walks all the time. They beg you for attention and affection. They're kind of needy - both physically and emotionally.

Cats, on the other hand, often prefer to not be around you. They like it when you leave for a few days and give them their space. Cats don't look to you for approval - they know they're the best thing that's ever happened to you. And *most of the time* this assurance is not because they've earned it. They literally sit

around all day - maybe getting up to stretch or eat or bathe or to play with a toy for a few minutes - but google tells me they sleep 12-16 hours a day. They have done absolutely nothing to earn the royal status they believe they not only have, but wholeheartedly deserve.

In a world where we are inundated with messages that our worth is wrapped up in what we do to make money and how much money we have, where the idea of hustling and hard work is revered above everything else - it's refreshing to live with a creature that doesn't buy it.

Jesus also doesn't buy it. Upon hearing that the death of John the Baptist is near, Jesus decides it's time for him to take the mantle to teach about the Kingdom of God. So, he starts inviting people to repent, telling them the Kingdom of God has come near - and he invites people to follow, they'll fish for people instead of fish. Christians have loved this image over the years. In some

respects, fishing for people has often been used as *the* image of following Jesus. That being a disciple means finding more and more people to recruit into the Jesus way. (Capitalism and more is better.)

As you might have guessed, this invitation - and the specific way Jesus makes it - is not as simple as it's often been made to seem. In her commentary from *Working Preacher* this week, Jillian Enghardt, professor at Texas Christian University orients us towards what is really going on when she writes, "The language of "kingdom" sets up God's rule in direct opposition to Rome's rule, thus repentance could also be understood as a choosing of allegiances."

Both Scholars Warren Carter and Ched Meyers write that at the time when Jesus' ministry was beginning, people who fished on the sea of galilee usually, even if indirectly, worked for the Roman Government. The Roman Empire had restructured the fishing

industry so that it profited them. They controlled the leases and permits for people to fish and they taxed the fish products as they were exported. Simon & Andrew, James & John - the brothers who drop their nets at Jesus' invitation - are likely a part of kin-ship cooperatives that leased the right to fish on the sea. The fruits of their labor financially supported the Romans. Therefore, in dropping their nets to follow Jesus, they weren't only choosing Jesus, they were simultaneously disrupting, even in just a small way, the roman empire's economic interests.

Meyers goes into even greater detail explaining that the metaphor Jesus uses when he invites the disciples to follow - the metaphor to "fish for people" - has roots in the Hebrew Bible in four different prophetic stories.

He writes, "Jeremiah envisions YHWH "sending for many fishermen" in order to catch the wayward people of Israel, specifically "those who have polluted the land with idols" (Jer

16:16-18). The prophet Amos targets the elite classes of Israel, whom he calls “cows of Bashan,” warning that YHWH will haul them away like sardines to judgment: “The time is surely coming upon you [who oppress the poor and crush the needy] when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks” (Am 4:1f).”¹ The other two examples are found in Ezekiel and Habbakuk.

He continues, “Jesus—who knew the prophetic literature *and* sought to embody it anew in his context—was using an idiom that “exposed and provoked” the conflict in order to address it. It mixed both the prophetic sense of warning to the oppressor classes and the lament of those oppressed by the privatizers of the Sea of Galilee’s commonwealth. He was summoning these marginalized workers to join him in...restoring God’s justice for the poor.”

1

<https://radicaldiscipleship.net/2015/01/22/lets-catch-some-big-fish-jesus-call-to-discipleship-in-a-world-of-injustice/>

Therefore, in dropping their nets to follow Jesus, these first disciples weren't only choosing Jesus, they were saying no to a system of exploitation and greed. Jesus invitation to follow, to fish for people, isn't just about professing a specific belief, it's about dropping whatever it is that ties you to that inhumane system under which we live and saying yes to an economy of love and grace, to a system of generosity and interdependence, to restoring God's justice for all who are oppressed.

The messages we receive about our worth being tied up with wealth and the importance of hustle are not by accident. They come from the same root of greed and exploitation that was going on in the Roman Empire as Jesus called the first disciples. They want us to believe that our worth is tied up in our work or in our wealth because it encourages us to keep hustling for the sake of the few who profit from our participation in that hustle - either through our work or through our spending. The Kingdom of God,

on the other hand, proclaims that each and every person, that all of creation is beloved because God says so and for that reason alone. It doesn't matter how much money you have, what you do for work or whether you work at all. Your worth is not tied up with what you're able to do or accumulate.

Nat and I met in 2015 through an organization in Portland, ME called the Southern Maine Workers Center - a space for workers who don't have a union to organize for better working and living conditions in the city of Portland and State of Maine. Our second date, in fact, was at a city council hearing where the city of Portland passed a higher minimum wage - a campaign we had been working on for a while. One of our friends from this community is a print maker who designed a series of prints she calls "Anti-Capitalist Love Notes."

(Show some of them.)

I have to admit that when I first saw them, I was profoundly moved in a way I wasn't expecting. This friend of mine does not identify as Christian and yet these love notes speak the Gospel to me on a regular basis. They ground me in what is really important. They remind me that I trust in God's promises made in baptism - promises that proclaim me beloved - rather than in the illusion of promise made through the hustle.

What grounds you in the promise that you are beloved simply because God said it is so? What ordinary, surprising, or unexpected factors of your life - like cats or a friend's art - point you towards the Gospel promise made for you and for all of creation?

Jesus calls you - not just to proclaim belief - but to follow, to fish for people, to be on the way that restores justice to the oppressed. But first, and foremost, Jesus calls you beloved.

Amen. Thanks be to God.