

Isaiah 9: 1-4; Matthew 4: 12-23

“I Will Make You...”

We are now in the season of the church year when we count the Sundays as so many Sundays after Epiphany. God’s loving intention for the whole wide world was made manifest in the coming of Christ, which we celebrated on Epiphany. And now, as Matthew begins to tell the story of Jesus’s life and ministry, we see God’s love and the wisdom of the kingdom of heaven embodied in Jesus, now walking among us, transforming the lives of those who follow him, and through them, the world that includes you and me.

Today, the Third Sunday after Epiphany, we learn that John the Baptist, who baptized Jesus, has been arrested, and it is then Jesus makes his move. Jesus leaves Nazareth and makes his home in Capernaum, by the Sea of Galilee. Nazareth was in the land of Zebulun and Capernaum was in the land of Naphtali, the 2 tribes of Israel, both were in Galilee, the land of the Gentiles, and the region that had been under the oppression of foreign empire of Assyria at the time the prophet Isaiah spoke. The Gospel of Matthew reminds us it was there Jesus began his ministry, as the light that dawned for they the people who sat in darkness.

Jesus begins his ministry, preaching “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” As Jesus was walking along the shore, it is Jesus who sees them, and it is Jesus who calls them to come follow him. First Jesus sees the brother Simon and Andrew, the fishermen, and calls them, promising to them “I will make you fish for people.” They were fishermen, doing their work, but they immediately follow Jesus.

Then, Jesus sees John and James, the sons of Zebedee, and calls them, again as they were doing their daily task as fishermen, and they immediately leave their boat and their father. It is as if these brothers who were fishermen have just been fished by Jesus. But why them? What qualifies them? What do they know about fishing for people? They don’t even know, at this point, what following Jesus would involve. Are they ready to turn their lives around just like that?

These questions are irrelevant, because there is power in Jesus’s voice, and his call comes with a promise; he will empower them to do what they are called to do. “I will make you fish for people.”

This is a story of the beginning, the very foundation of the community of faith, the church of Jesus Christ. We are formed solely by the power of his call, and we are empowered and

sustained by his promise as we follow him. Just yesterday, I was listening to your church treasurer explain the process of preparing the church budget, which will be shared with you next week at the annual congregational meeting. She said “I wanted to be optimistic but conservative; hopeful yet realistic.” That’s exactly right; our faith in God’s promise to empower the church makes us optimistic, and our intellect and what we know about the way of this world keeps us realistic, and they go together.

Just as Jesus called these fishermen when they were doing their work, we are called from the fabric of family relations and daily vocation, out of the unique circumstances of our lives, our communities, cultures, families, and occupations we find ourselves in. God uses our life experiences and the skills we’ve gained from them to serve God’s intention, the divine mission, for the world. So, come as you are. You are enough. God who calls makes us enough for God’s purpose.

There are a few details in this story that get in the way of our ability to hear this invitation from Jesus as a good news. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” If God promises that we are enough, if Jesus calls us to come as we are, then why the command to Repent? For many of us, the call to repentance has been so negatively linked with self-denial, self-annihilation, utter rejection of self-worth, that it has left a deep wound in our spiritual life, a religious trauma.

But Jesus’s call to repentance is all about changing one’s mind, turning our lives around so that we can live a truly abundant life, full of joy and meaning. To repent means to turn the course of our lives to align with God’s desire for the world, and that is always life-giving all around. To repent is not to feel bad for being who we are, but to think differently. To repent doesn’t mean to grovel in self-hatred or pious sorrow. It’s a radical reorientation of our life, and it is always life-giving, healing, restorative, liberating and redemptive. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. Now, can you hear it differently?

Another detail in this story that is puzzling, if not outright distressing, is the fact that the sons of Zebedee leave their father in the boat to follow Jesus immediately. Does this mean that following Jesus requires abandoning our parents and all our social and familial responsibilities? If that’s what “see ye first the kingdom of God” requires, I’m not sure if I can go there.

Many of us are in that place in our lives where caring for our parents who cared for us all their lives is a priority and sacred duty. Some of us are the parents who have dedicated our lives to raising our families and now are learning to receive the loving care from our children.

No, Jesus's call is not a call to abandon our parents. In fact, we learn later in Matthew's Gospel that the parents of John and James, the sons of Zebedee are very much involved in their sons' lives, or at least the mother is. She asks Jesus to do a favor for her sons, and let one sit on his right side and the other on his left in the kingdom of heaven. You can just imagine the sons rolling their eyes in embarrassment, "Oh, Mom..."

John and James do not cease to be the sons of Zebedee when they start to follow Jesus. In following Jesus, they are not only the sons of Zebedee, but they are now also the sons of Zebedee who serve God, their heavenly parent, with all that their earthly parents equipped them with. In that, they bless the parents' lives. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and its righteousness," is followed by "all these things will be given to you as well." That, too, is God's promise we must remember when we face challenges, especially from our families, along our own faith journey.

To emphasize the power of Jesus's call, Matthew describes the disciples' response to Jesus's call immediate and decisive. From the perspective of human experience, our response to the call is often more gradual, as we discern and sometimes resist the sense of call we feel. We don't quite trust the power of God's call, and we trust even less that we are enough.

Last week, I shared with you how I came to become baptized at age 15, and how, at one point after my baptism, it dawned on me that I had understood my relationship with God all wrong. I grew up thinking, just as my earthly parents provided for my well-being and supported me in my pursuit of my dreams, God was there to help me achieve the goals I set for myself, like a good cheerleader. Sometime after I was baptized, something told me that God had an even bigger plan than the goals I had set for myself and God's plan for me would affect not just me but the world through me; in God's plan, my life was a part, however small, of the divine mission that was and remains beyond my wildest dreams. This was a major reorientation of my life.

When I finished my 7th grade, my parents gave me an opportunity to visit the US and stay with a Christian family in Long Beach, CA for one week, and I went to a Christian school with my host sister who was in 6th grade. That experience was so powerful and wonderful that, when I returned to Japan, I was determined to go back to the US for high school, rather than going to a high school in Japan.

To many people, this seemed like a major derailment in a young life. I had a very caring and supportive teacher in the 8th grade. Seeing how determined I was to “pursue my dream,” he asked “Okay, I understand you want to do this. But what will become of you after you’ve done it, gone to the US, graduated from American school... then what?”

You see, in the Japanese culture that I grew up, and this is 40 years ago now, there were firmly established social tracks everyone was expected to follow, and the “lanes” were defined by your gender. After finishing the mandatory middle school, if you were a girl, you’d go to high school, and then perhaps a 2 year vocational school, or possibly a 2 year college to get an Associate Degree, and then you would get married. Or, you might get a job, for a few years, until you got married.

More ambitious women would go to a 4-year college or university, but upon graduation, the career options for women were limited to administrative support, otherwise known as “tea pourers.” Even if a women achieved a level of education and learned professional skills and managed to be gainfully employed, the retirement age for women was, by the company policy, “at marriage.”

So, my 8th grade teacher was concerned about my future. Who would want to hire someone with an American degree? What man would want to marry a woman educated in the US? Those were my teachers’ sincere concerns for me, which I totally failed to appreciate.

It was not a career ambition that sent me off to the US. I grew up in a church but, outside the church, I had little contact with other Christians, especially of my age. Please don’t misunderstand, I am not saying America is God’s country and Japan is not; remember, the Scriptures tell us God is the God of all nations. I am only saying, to be in a culture where God’s presence was acknowledged and talking about one’s faith was normal was entirely new to me.

I wanted to grow up having conversation not just with God but with others who knew God. I wanted to express how I saw God’s love and pain reflected in the world and explore with other people of faith what it would mean to embody the prayer “Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done on Earth as it is in Heaven.” What would it be like if God’s dream became my dream. I didn’t know what carrier I would end up in, but I knew, if I followed this call, God would make me be what I was meant to be. And here I am.

God's dream is unfolding in your life, no matter where you are on your life's journey. God's dream is continuing to unfold in the life of this congregation. "I will make you," if you follow. And that's a promise. Thanks be to God.