

Wesley United Methodist Church      Rev. Beverly E Stenmark  
January 26, 2020  
Title: Follow Me  
Scripture: Isaiah 9:1-4  
Matthew 4:12-23

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair ... , we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way...” Charles Dickens began his novel, A Tale of Two Cities with these words. He used them to compare and contrast London and Paris during the French Revolution.

This week, these words came to my mind as a way to describe our world today. For some it does seem to be the best of times, but for many it is also the worst of times. It can be easy to become discouraged by the news around us. We are even reminded that for our own mental and emotional health, it is important for us to unplug from the news sometimes and be intentional about focusing on those things that renew us and give us hope.

I think that today’s scriptures help us find some of that hope. The prophet Isaiah is writing about a time that has been very dark and discouraging. However, a new king has just come to the throne after defeating a foreign enemy. The nation anticipated a time of peace and national security. Isaiah tells us that the people who have walked in darkness, have now seen a great light.

Matthew used these same words to talk about Jesus. As a people they were living under Roman oppression. Personally, Jesus had recently

received word that his cousin John had been arrested. It wouldn't be long before John was executed. It was time for Jesus to begin his public ministry.

Despite the call for a king or messiah that would overthrow Rome, Jesus had a different vision for his ministry and the kingdom of God. Jesus' vision was one of nonviolence. As he began his public ministry, Jesus relocated to Capernaum, the place that Isaiah was talking about when he said that the people who walked in darkness had seen a great light.

Capernaum, on the north coast of the Sea of Galilee had long been associated with the Gentiles. The mission to the Gentiles is important in Jesus' ministry. Jesus' calls on people to repent – but in a different way than John had. It is different than the message that we often hear, “Repent, so you won't go to hell.” For Jesus, this is not a message of fear, or judgement.

“Repent” literally means “turn around”, “go in a different direction”. Jesus proclaims that God is making a new world and that there will be a new and different direction, a direction that brings hope even in despair, a direction that brings light even in the obvious darkness. This new world is one in which decisions and actions may seem counterintuitive in a world where the instinct is to respond to violence with violence, to seek revenge, to get even, or even to step things up a notch.

Traditionally, in Jesus' day, people would find a teacher or rabbi and ask if they might follow him, learn from him, be one of his disciples. But Jesus, at the very beginning of his ministry took a different approach. He didn't wait for people to seek him out. He was proactive. He approached

those he wanted to have follow him and he issued the invitation to “come and see” or to “follow me.”

In the Wesleyan tradition, we talk about grace in several ways and one of the big words we use is “prevenient grace”. It is a way of describing God working in our lives before we are even aware of it. Prevenient grace is one of the reasons we baptize infants who can’t possibly know that God is reaching out and claiming them.

Prevenient grace is operating here when Jesus approaches Simon Peter and Andrew as they were fishing. Prevenient grace is operating when Jesus calls James and his brother John to come and follow him. They didn’t really know what they were getting into but there was something about Jesus’ invitation to them that caused them to respond and follow him.

It was an ordinary day for these four men as they went about the work they did every day, cleaning and mending their nets, casting their nets into the sea, catching fish. And yet, it soon became an extraordinary day – a day when their lives were changed forever.

Peter and Andrew, James and John didn’t seem to have any great qualifications that would make them attractive to someone seeking to build a ministry or a following. They were normal men, part of their community, established in their family business. They worked hard to provide for themselves and their families. They were hard working men who knew how to catch fish. The only ability that they seemed to possess was the ability to say, “Yes” when Jesus called them.

Jesus called them to follow him and included a promise in that call. If they would follow him, Jesus would make them fish for people. Jesus would use their personalities and their abilities in ways they could not even begin to imagine.

I don't know much about fishing, but I do know a few things. I know that typically fishing requires patience. Whether fishing professionally, or with a rod and reel on the side of the water, fishing takes time. There are times when one might catch many fish and other times when you go home empty handed.

Fishing requires different kinds of bait, equipment and locations for different kinds of fish. You would not expect to catch a huge tuna while standing along the shore and certainly not while using a fishing rod from the local sports store and a worm from your yard.

This passage and Jesus' call to Peter, Andrew, James, and John marks the beginning of the church as we know it. There would be others who would be called. Some would be fishermen, but one would be a tax collector and another a revolutionary. Some would be out-spoken and quick to judge; others would be much more quiet and gentle. Some would find it easy to believe in Jesus, but one would betray him, and another would find it impossible to believe in Jesus' resurrection until he actually saw Jesus.

They really weren't much different than we are today. They were a diverse group of people, with different personalities and different abilities, just like us. Some of them would finally write letters or accounts of Jesus' ministry. Some would travel extensively to tell others about Jesus. Some are known to us only because their names appear in a list of disciples in one of the gospels.

And yet, Jesus had a plan for each of them. Jesus called each of them to be part of the initial team that would introduce people to the radical vision of ministry that Jesus had. They would gradually learn that the ways of the world were not the ways that Jesus proclaimed and taught.

Jesus continues to call people every day. Jesus has called each of us to be part of the team that helps bring light to a world where darkness seems to predominate. Each of us has different abilities, different likes and dislikes, and Jesus can use each of us in different ways.

Some of us find ourselves teaching children in Sunday School. Some of us may lead adult studies. Others use their gifts of music to sing in the choir or play instruments to God's glory. Others are great at visiting people, listening to them, sending cards and finding ways to let people know that they are valued and important.

Some are wonderful at organizing events or people and think of all the things that many of us overlook. Some are particularly good at focusing on prayer. Others cook wonderful food, sew, knit or crochet, or make other useful items. Some paint. Each of us is different and yet, God calls each and every one of us and can use our abilities and desires in ways that help to spread the good news of God's love.

When God called the disciples, he wasn't calling them to some far in the future hope. Each Sunday morning, we pray, that God's will be done "on earth as it is in heaven". God called the disciples and us to contemporary action, to fish for human beings, to reach out to God's children and share God's love in any number of ways.

Most of us will probably not do things that will make national or international headlines or make us famous. However, in small ways, every day we can make a difference in the life of one person and in the world.

One of the devotionals I use is by Rev. Cameron Trimble, the author of a book recommended by our Bishop called, "Piloting Church". This week, she included a prayer that spoke to me about this and spoke to me about the hope that we need in order to keep going in our daily lives and in

the face of all that we face. She wrote, “God, in the face of great need, when the work feels huge and I feel small, may I learn of the power of the mustard seed. May I trust that my showing up, taking root, growing branches, be enough to do small great things that heal the world.”<sup>i</sup>

Jesus is the one who brings light to the world. Jesus is the one who calls us and shows us a way that is different than much of what we hear from the loud voices in our culture and our world.

Here, at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, he went to the region of the Gentiles so that we would know that his ministry was for all people. Jesus called people to “repent” to go in a different direction to be part of God’s kingdom that offers a radically different approach to life; one that offers hope in despair, and light in darkness. Jesus called people to follow him and to “fish for people”. Jesus continues to call people just like you and me to “fish for people”, to make a difference.

This afternoon, we will gather as the people of Wesley Church, called by God, to explore where and how God is calling us into the future. Peter, Andrew, James, and John left their fishing boats behind to discover the ways that God was calling them to be faithful. We may be called to leave some of our boats behind or to climb into other boats as we try to understand how God wants us to share God’s word and God’s love in our world today – and especially in our community just beyond our doors. God calls each of us and can use the various abilities that each of us brings.

The good news is that no matter where and how God calls us, we never go alone. After Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James, and John, Matthew tells us that “Jesus 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.” Whatever we do,

wherever we go, we have the promise that Jesus goes with us and guides our path.

---

<sup>i</sup> Trimble, Cameron. "Piloting Faith: An (Almost) Daily Devotional from the Center for Progressive Renewal" Jan 24, 2020.