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Epiphany 3A
Peace, Seattle
January 23, 2014
Matthew 4:12-23

FOLLOWING = PRACTICING

Recalling a weekly tradition of his family home, Rodger Nishioka relates how every Sunday evening his family would watch Mutual of Omaha's "Wild Kingdom," a nature program many of us of a certain age will recall, and a precursor of today's "Animal Planet."

> "For my Presbyterian pastor father," writes Nishioka, "each episode was a theological journey demonstrating to us all yet once again the wonders of God's creativity and imagination in the natural world."
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> "One episode I remember fondly was about the elephant seals of Argentina. The show focused on a mother and her seal pup, who had just been born. Soon after birthing her baby, the mother, now famished, abandoned the pup on the shore so she could go feed in the rich waters off the coast. After feeding, she returned to a different part of the beach and began to call for her baby. [Hundreds of] other mothers had done the same, and all had returned in a similar time. I remember thinking they would never find one another."
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> "The camera then followed the mother as she called to her pup and listed for the response. Following each other's voices and scents, soon the mother and pup were reunited."
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> "From the moment of birth, the sound and scent of the pup are imprinted in the mother's memory, and the sound and scent of the mother are imprinted in the pup's memory," and this fact "fascinated me," he writes. "Especially when Dad turned to me and said, 'You know, that's how it is with God. We are imprinted with a memory of God, and God is imprinted with a memory of us, and even if it takes a lifetime, we will find each other.' "[1]

In today's gospel reading we witness the rollout of Jesus' public ministry and watch as he calls on two sets of brothers, Simon & Andrew, and James & John, to leave their nets behind and follow him.

This condensed encounter leaves out much of the detail that we are dying to know:

- Had Jesus met these guys before his encounter with them on the beach that day?
- And were they ready for a vocational change, or did his invitation take them completely by surprise?
- Is there a longer story behind their "YES" to him, a "director's cut" version that gives us deeper background but that Matthew chose to leave out? Or did it all unfold with the speed that his telling implies?

The point, finally, of course, is not the backstory, whatever it may have been, but their response to him: they followed. Something internal, something fundamental shifted within these four fishermen when Jesus engaged them, and it led to an external act: they left the boat and their father and followed him."

Exactly what this following would mean was not at all clear to them at this moment. And it would only become clear after their journey with him moved through Galilee to Judea to Jerusalem's cross and empty tomb.

[1] Rodger Nishioka, *Feasting on the Word.* (Louisville: Westminster John Know Press, 2010), p. 284, 286.

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But this is where it all started. With his announcement that God's promised reign was no longer a distant "some day" but was, in truth, among them now and that now was the time for them to turn toward it by turning toward him, and following.

One of the pilgrimage arcs our family will take when we embark on our sabbatical journey five weeks from now is following the journey of the gospel from its planting in Ireland through the work of St. Patrick and others, to the Isle of Iona, founded by the great Irish evangelist St. Columba, then with St. Aiden who was sent from Iona's missionary training school to become an evangelist and teacher in Northumbria and who founded a monastery on the Holy Isle of Lindisfarne.

It was from here, from the schools, scriptoriums, monasteries and abbeys of Ireland, Iona, and Holy Island—not from the collapsing centers of Roman culture around the Mediterranean, which fell to ruin with when the Empire fell—that the Christian gospel and the patrimony of western civilization made its way through what we now call the United Kingdom, and from there into Europe; a fascinating and remarkable story, wonderfully told by Thomas Cahill in his book How the Irish Saved Civilization.[2]

Patrick, Columba, Aiden, and those who came after them found themselves captive to the Christ who met them in the stories of Scripture, and they rose to follow, convinced by their own experience of Christ's saving and transforming power & presence in their lives.

When you read their histories and biographies you can't help but be struck by the enormity of what it meant in the 5th, 6th, 7th centuries to hear Christ's summons: FOLLOW ME, and to leave one's nets and FOLLOW.

But we live in neither the 1st nor the 5th but rather the 21st century. And so the question is ours to ask, What does it mean to follow Christ in our day and time?

For many of us today the focus of this question has become: How do I, how do we, put "following Jesus" into practice in our daily lives?

In her book Christianity After Religion, in the chapter entitled BEHAVING, Diana Butler Bass reminds us that…

> "Although Western Christianity would eventually be defined as a belief system about God, throughout its first five centuries people understood it primarily as spiritual practices that offered a meaningful way of life in this world—not as a neat set of doctrines, an esoteric belief, or the promise of heaven. By practicing Jesus' teachings," writes Bass, "followers of the way discover that their lives were made better on a practical spiritual path." [3]

Indeed, she reminds us, early Christianity was not called "Christianity" at all.
Rather it was called "the Way," and its followers were called "the People of the Way."

Faithfulness wasn't measured by people's opinions about this or that doctrine; faithfulness was measured by how one practiced love of God and neighbor.

Faith practices, she writes, "weave together a way of life…shape character, create connections between people, order our choices, and deepen our wisdom about living in the world."

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[2] Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe.* (New York: Doubleday, 1995).
[3] Quotes from pp. 146-149.

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In other words, when faith is a verb, it's not something we profess as we gather once a week, it's a way of life, a way of being in the world that seeks to be in conversation with and in step with Jesus' invitation: FOLLOW ME.

The FAITH FIVE practices you've been hearing about from Nicole, practices that parents here and in other congregations are incorporating into the daily rhythms of their households, are all about making faith a verb.

By trying out practices that link our home life with the life of faith we share in this congregation we open ourselves to the transforming power and presence of Christ—the very one who has become imprinted in us, and we in him, through the waters of baptism.

Our faith practice of gathering in this place weekly for Word and Meal links us with People of the Way around the world and through the past 20 centuries who have found themselves addressed and blessed, fed and forgiven, and called and sent for service in God's world.

When we dismiss from worship and head downstairs in a few minutes, the words of Jesus we've heard freshly this morning will accompany us: Come follow me.

And what we decide to accomplish together in the name of Jesus over the coming year, and how we choose to fund this mission, will become the blueprint for our response to his invitation to follow.

We won't get it perfect, of course. There is, for sure, more than one way to follow Jesus. But when all is said and done, my prayer is that we come away energized and eager to put our particular brand of FOLLOWING JESUS into practice, in ways that will make a difference in here (heart), in here (community), and beyond these walls, in the world.

Lord Jesus, you meet us in the midst of our daily lives and bid us follow you.
May the mission you have called us to embody in this place, bring honor to you and new life and purpose to those whom we serve. In your name.

Amen.