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Epiphany 3A
January 26, 2020
Matthew 4:12-23

HERE, BY ME

Today the gospel calls us to the heart of God's message in Christ: FOLLOW ME!

Matthew tells us that when Jesus got word of John's arrest, he took it as a cue to begin his own public ministry. **And what he does next is important.** Instead of returning to the security of his home in Nazareth, he moves on to Capernaum, on the northeast shore of Galilee.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT? Seven centuries before, this was the first territory to be swallowed up by the invading Assyrian armies. Isaiah prophesied that this same territory would be the first upon whom the light of God's salvation would dawn. That prophesy, says Matthew, comes true when Jesus begins his ministry at Capernaum.[1]

Through Jesus, God's great counterattack against all evil forces, against all darkness, against all dead end addictions begins.

God promised a light to the nations, and Jesus himself will be that light.
But he won't do it alone. He will do it by building a community of light.

So his ministry begins on the shores of Galilee.

Walking by the sea, Jesus sees two brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew, casting a net.
He sees, he watches, he calls—FOLLOW ME! Or more literally—HERE...AFTER ME.
Immediately they leave their nets and follow him.

Further down the shoreline James and John are cleaning nets with their father.
Jesus calls to them, too: HERE, AFTER ME, and they leave everything and follow him.
Ordinary men, doing ordinary work; Jesus takes the initiative, issues the call, and they respond.

He doesn't promise that their lives will be less demanding or even more fulfilling;
He doesn't dangle a signing bonus or a contract incentive in front of them.
He simply says, I WILL TEACH YOU TO FISH FOR PEOPLE IF YOU COME HERE, AFTER ME.

What does it mean to follow Jesus? To walk HERE, AFTER ME?

Some years ago at a conference, the keynote speaker, Herb, shared a watershed event from his life.[2]

It was the summer after his college graduation. He'd applied for a scholarship to study overseas in Germany, but in order to maintain the sense of order he'd always relied on in his life, he'd also applied to a graduate program in the States.

When August rolled around, he hadn't heard a word from Germany, and not being able to live with uncertainty, he decided to enroll in the US program. He wrote to the University in Germany and withdrew his name.

Two days later, a letter arrived from Germany notifying him that he would receive a full scholarship to study in Germany. But it was too late. His letter and the one he'd received had crossed in the mail.

[1] Robert Smith, Matthew. ANTC. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989.
[2] Herb Anderson, Byberg Conference 2002.

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I HAVE ALWAYS WONDERED, he told us, HOW MY LIFE WOULD HAVE BEEN DIFFERENT HAD I ENDURED THE UNCERTAINTY AND GONE TO STUDY IN GERMANY.

I think these two sets of brothers, Peter and Andrew, James and John, know something about what Herb was talking about. They were called to leave what they had known behind to walk HERE, AFTER ME. It was a watershed decision, and their lives would never be the same.

Saying YES to Christ is risky business.

- If I go HERE, AFTER HIM he may take me to places I'd rather not go.

One writer put it this way: It might not be necessary for all of us who hear Jesus' call to leave our professions and possessions behind, but we all must leave the world we've known behind, and enter the new world into which Jesus invites us.[3]

Leaving the known for the unknown invites all kinds of questions. But we may miss the point if we hear the text simply in terms of our personal calling, because something essential is being said here about the call to be part of a community.

As he walks on the shore Jesus makes it clear that he is no lone ranger.

His work is about building community, about creating a fellowship, a new kind of family. In his first act of ministry he begins gathering that community of apprentices around him. He begins to teach them that the call of God isn't simply about individual destiny—that there's something larger at stake.

As we read annual reports today, looking back at what we've been about during our 75th anniversary year and looking forward to proposals for 2020, we owe it to one another to ask:

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR US AS A CONGREGATION TO FOLLOW JESUS?

For a dozen years now the words of our VISION STATEMENT have read:

> ***Grounded in God's grace, we are called to cultivate faith and trust in our life together, to discern God's challenge into unfamiliar places, and to venture beyond ourselves, so all people will experience God's love.***

Over the years we've put care into articulating what STANDING WITH JESUS looks like.
This year one of our proposals suggests we expand our language to include CREATION CARE as one of our core values and commitments.

Today we'll look back at those goals we embraced and ask: did we accomplish what we set out to do?

And then we'll look forward once again and ask WHAT, SPECIFICALLY, DOES IT MEAN FOR US TOGETHER TO FOLLOW JESUS in 2020? TO WALK HERE, AFTER ME?

When anyone is in Christ, writes St. Paul, there is a new creation; an entirely new world.
Every old has passed away, it's history; Everything has become new. [2 Cor. 5:17]

To answer Christ's call, to STAND HERE, BY ME, is to enter the landscape of that whole, new world.
Let's do it. Let's go there. Together. Amen.

[3] Douglass Hare, Matthew. Westminster John Knox, 1993, p. 30.