

Working in God's Company
Matthew 4: 12-23
Ann Hatfield

In the 1991 movie *Defending Your Life*, actors Albert Books and Meryl Streep portray two people just after their deaths. But before transitioning from their earthly existence, their lives must be evaluated in a place called Judgment City. During these proceedings, a defense attorney and a prosecutor both offer evidence, presented by video footage of significant events in a defendant's life.

Contrary to what most of us expect, the purpose of the trial is NOT to judge whether a person was good or bad. Instead, the trial determines whether a person learned how to conquer fear. The proceedings do not go well for the Albert Brooks character. In one life experience after another, he is repeatedly unsuccessful in overcoming his fears. Given all his fearful decisions and timid choices, it appears he will return to Earth and try again to be courageous. For those who have not seen this movie, I don't want to spoil everything by revealing the outcome for Meryl Streep's character. If you want to find out what happens at the end, you will have to watch the film to find out!

In his book *Conquering Fear*, Rabbi Harold Kushner, suggests “**Do Not Be Afraid**” should be considered the “Eleventh Commandment” – like an addendum to the original Ten Commandments. Kushner notes the Bible frequently encourages people not to be afraid.¹ God says it to Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Mary, and Joseph. At Jesus' birth, the angel reassures the terrified shepherds: “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.”²

In today's passage, four fishermen appear to heed this command. When asked to accept an extremely unusual invitation into an unknown future, they do so immediately. Without fear, trepidation, or delay, Simon, Andrew, James, and John drop their nets, step out of the boat, and follow Jesus. Biblical scholar Douglas Hare notes, “the call story is here reduced to its barest essentials: Jesus summons with IRRESISTIBLE authority, and the men respond with RADICAL obedience.”³ Without hesitation, they join Jesus in his ministry.

According to Matthew, Jesus begins that ministry by declaring: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This echoes the earlier proclamation of John the Baptist, but also extends it with the promised arrival of God's kingdom. Jesus announces AND embodies this kingdom of heaven – this rule and reign of God in our lives. In the person of Jesus and in his ministry, a new reality has broken into the world; God's kingdom has taken up residence WITH US!

In the person of Jesus, as translated by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*, “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish.”⁴ The four fishermen experience the irresistible authority of Jesus not just in his voice and words, but in his very person.

As we consider Jesus’ message, it also is important to remember the call to repent is not just about remorse or guilt. Rather, in the biblical understanding, repentance literally means to turn around, to change direction. Jesus is calling people to a whole new way of living. New Testament scholar William Barclay notes, Jesus invites us to, “Turn from your own ways, and turn to God. Lift your eyes from earth and look to heaven. Reverse your direction, and stop walking away from God and begin walking towards God.”⁵

Following Jesus and walking toward God is not easy. FEAR often gets in our way, blocking our path and hindering our progress. Many of us experience moments when fear takes hold of us, squeezing us – like a boa constrictor – in an unbreakable grip. Fear has the ability to paralyze us, to limit us, to isolate us. Afraid and uncertain, all too often we make timid choices (like the Albert Brooks character in the movie) – other times, we make NO decisions at all. Doubt and fear are natural, human responses in a world filled with darkness, pain, and death. How do we join these early disciples to become faithful followers of Jesus?

First, by remembering that Simon, Andrew, James, and John were average, ordinary people. They were not the rich, powerful, and important leaders of their day. But in their daily lives as fishermen, they did have a wealth of COURAGE. They were accustomed to facing the destructive power of wind and waves on the sea. Fishing was their livelihood, not a relaxing amusement; the fishing they did was difficult, exhausting, and sometimes dangerous. Perhaps this is why Jesus began his ministry by inviting fishermen to follow him. Jesus could see not only what a person was, but – more significantly – who that person could BECOME!.

Most of us can probably recall a time when we stepped out of our comfort zones to pursue a new responsibility, job, relationship, or life experience. We likely felt some fear, uncertainty, and doubt. Yet, we discovered the courage to make the commitment, to leave the familiar, and venture into an unknown future. Expressed in the words of Mark Twain, “Courage is not the absence of fear but the mastery of fear.” Following Jesus is not without fear; saying yes does take courage.

Listen to author Anne Lamott, as she describes her faith journey in her book *Traveling Mercies*:

My coming to faith did not start with a leap but rather a series of staggers from what seemed like one safe place to another. Like lily pads, round and green, these places summoned and then held me up while I grew. Each prepared me for the next leaf on which I would land, and in this way I moved across the

swamp of doubt and fear. When I look back at some of these early resting places . . . I can see how flimsy and indirect a path they made. Yet each step brought me closer to the verdant pad of faith on which I somehow stay afloat today.⁶

This past Tuesday, in an annual joint meeting of our Session and Board of Deacons, our incoming ruling elders and deacons shared their faith statements. During my years at Westminster, I have heard many incoming officers describe their Christian beliefs, their love of Jesus, and their unique experience of God in their lives. It is a holy privilege to listen to these faith journeys. No two statements are alike. Some statements are sprinkled with laughter; others are told through tears.

Such intimate faith-sharing with one another is a sacred practice. It is a reminder not so much about who we are, but WHOSE we are. We belong to the One who invites us to follow. More importantly, we belong to the One who promises to keep us company along EVERY step of the journey!

With the ordination and installation of these officers, we celebrate their gifts for particular areas of service within our congregation. They likely have some uncertainty, doubts, and fears about this new calling – but they answered YES to the invitation! Not all are called to serve as elders, deacons, and trustees; but every single one of us is equipped for ministry in some way. And – thankfully – not all in the SAME way! As members with a variety of talents and gifts, we are a stronger and healthier church, as well as a truer expression of the body of Christ.

Listening for the voice of Jesus can be challenging. God's call may come as a still, small voice – just a whisper on the wind. Additionally, we may hear other voices in society calling us to different choices. Theologian Frederick Buechner declares, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."⁷ Here you will find your vocation; this is where God is calling you.

How is Jesus calling us – you and me – to follow him into this new year? Is God calling you to get involved in one of our God-sized Dreams, working with others in ministries to Expand, Serve, House, and Equip? Where does YOUR deep gladness meet the world's deep hunger?

Pastor and poet Steve Garnaas-Holmes writes,

. . . the call you fear and long the most to answer,
so close in voice and volume
to the first "Let there be light"—
the simple summons: "Follow me."

And, just a bit, sometimes, you do
and are reborn.⁸

Following Jesus is a call that promises a whole new life – a new identity in Christ. As one biblical scholar explains, “We have some changing to do, some new directions to take; its primary orientation, though, is toward God’s future rather than our past. . . [It] is an invitation to trust in a future made possible by the grace of God.”⁹

Jesus says, “Follow me.” It is a simple summons, calling us to a new way of living. Listen for the invitation to be caught up in God’s life-giving work. At times, it may feel as if we are barely staggering from one flimsy lily pad to another. The good news for us is – unlike the fictional Albert Brooks character – we don’t need to come back to move beyond our fears. God extends the invitation AND provides the courage and strength to say yes. Jesus says, “Follow me.” And . . . just a bit . . . sometimes . . . we do, and are REBORN!

May it be so. Amen.

¹ Harold Kushner, *Conquering Fear*, 6.

² NRSV, Luke 2:10.

³ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation series, 30.

⁴ Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, John 1:14.

⁵ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, volume 1, 76.

⁶ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, 3.

⁷ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, “vocation.”

⁸ Steve Garnaas-Holmes, “Call and Response,” www.unfoldinglight.net, January 22, 2020.

⁹ Gary W. Charles, *Feasting on the Gospels*, 23.