

I Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington
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SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 4:12-23

12 Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

¹⁵ 'Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
¹⁶ the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned.'

¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

18 As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen.

¹⁹And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.' ²⁰Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ²²Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

23 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.

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You may have noticed that for the last couple of months, we've heard beginning stories. The beginning of John the Baptist's ministry; the beginning of Mary's story; Jesus' baptism and the beginning of his ministry - and today, the beginning of the disciples' story, as they were called to follow Jesus. When this story comes up in the church calendar, it gets me to reflecting on my own call or callings - and how they've turned out so far. Today I'm going to share some of those reflections - and ask you what your callings are.

I wonder if you've also had a sense of God's call on your life - and what you find when you reflect on your own calling. Every Christian, by virtue of our baptism and by virtue of being in the church, is called to follow Jesus. You may think, that's just for Peter and Andrew, James and John, and people with Reverend in front of our names, but whenever you've sensed God urging you toward a vocation, professional or otherwise, that's a calling. Whenever you've sensed God asking you to bring your gifts and passions together with the needs of the world, that's a calling. And every kind of person is called to follow Jesus - we know it from the gospels to now. Fishermen and tax collectors, wealthy householders and outcasts, tax collectors and water carriers, mothers-in-laws and children with fish to share. Teachers and nurses and pastors and parents. Calling isn't just about our jobs, either.

I know that I've been asked to follow Jesus in more ways than just ordained ministry.

"I wouldn't take nothing for my journey now," as the gospel singer Jimmy Davis sang and Maya Angelou wrote. "I wouldn't take nothing for my journey now." But it's not over.

It seems to me I am at a mid-point in the story of my calling(s). I'm forty-eight years old, and in ten weeks time, I'll observe the twentieth anniversary of my ordination. I figure that means I might have another twenty years to pastor. But I hope I've got a lot longer to follow Jesus.

I can tell you the exact moment that I felt God calling me to pastoral ministry. It was twenty seven years ago this month. Some of you have heard me tell the tale:

My call came suddenly, but in the midst of a year pointing over and over to ministry. I was sitting in a borrowed car in Minneapolis, shivering, but not because of the winter cold. I was shivering because I had an amazing sense of God's direction. It was as if I heard a voice saying "Do This: Become a pastor."

For an undergraduate oral history project I had visited a woman who was vibrant and wise, but also isolated and lonely. No one visited or called her regularly - those who did sometimes visit seemed unwilling to sit down with her and really engage her in conversation or take seriously her ideas. I was just there to allow her to share her life story, and her analysis of events.

Now, unlike the disciples I did not *immediately* do anything. I finished college with the major I'd completed, moved to Boston and worked in software. I went to church and

thought about what it meant to be a Christian adult. And I listened to stories. (You don't have to be ordained to listen.)

I went to divinity school and pondered this calling. (I did not drop everything and leave my family - sure enough, my mother moved to Boston around then, and John and I got married a little later. I stayed pretty close to the family boat.)

20 years ago in March, I said yes to the vows of ordination in the United Church of Christ and knelt as hands were laid on my shoulders and I received the symbols of this calling. But this was not the last moment of call.

12 years ago, I felt a new and additional calling - I've also spoken of the moment when, in a dream as clear as could be, I heard a calling to climate action. This calling didn't replace my pastoral calling - for nearly a decade I did my best to follow both senses of calling, at the same time and sometimes together.

And then things changed again. I prayed and wondered how to continue that almost bi-vocational phase. Nearly three and a half years ago, I was called to this place, and began a new phase of ministerial call, a return to full time focus on a congregation.

I did not know three and a half years ago that something of this particular call to follow Jesus would be to help a whole congregation figure out how to follow Jesus through a pandemic.

Pilgrims, that's just one of the ways the path has gone in different directions than I expected, but I wouldn't take nothing for the journey now.

I'll tell you this: from the very first moment I felt a call, I knew it could not be on my own. Like the disciples, I'm always part of a team (even if there are moments when I, like the disciples did that one time, try for all the attention and glory).

And I'll also say: I think every person's call is different, and every person's calling changes. Calling changes with our circumstances, calling changes as we learn and grow and gain skill, calling changes when the world needs something new from us.

Fred Buechner once said, "Vocation [that is literally calling] is the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need." Our gladness and the world's needs change with time.

David Lose comments on the call stories we hear in Matthew, reminding us that there are many callings in this one short passage:

“ The call to John the Baptist, even though it leads to imprisonment. Jesus’ withdrawal, which in Matthew is not about retreating but rather an intentional time to listen and respond to God’s call. Then Jesus’ own call to the crowds to perceive and become a part of God’s in-breaking kingdom, followed by his call to a few specific fishermen, those he has called as his disciples to catch up all kinds of people in the net of God’s grace. There are different kinds of callings, yet each is from God.”¹

I don’t think Peter, Andrew, James and John had any idea what it would mean to fish for people. And I’m certain the specifics of their calling changed with time. They fed people, they preached, they healed, they sat with the crowds.

Sometimes they failed in their calling, and sometimes they came close. Thank God for grace. Thank God we are not saviors but merely people who follow a Savior. I imagine those who *immediately* left their boats and followed Jesus in to a new calling would look back later and say the same: wouldn’t give nothing for my journey now. And maybe, you can say the same.

Amen.

¹ <https://www.davidlose.net/2017/01/epiphany-3-a-being-before-doing/>