

January 22, 2023
"Answering the Call"
Psalm 22 / Matthew 4:18-23
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

I'm not preaching this morning on the Psalm we just heard from Mary Grey, the translation again this week from Wilda Gafney's remarkable "Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church."

But did you notice the complete use of feminine language for God? How could you not, right? In the arc of Christian history, and in the vast majority of churches still today, God is and always has been presented as exclusively male. As Father. As He, Him, His.

And so, sadly, it can be startling to the ear to hear language about God that is exclusively feminine.

At Calvary, as I think most of you know, we are generally committed to the use of "inclusive" language – that is, language for God, for the divine, that is not "exclusive," that does not impose a narrow, a particular, way of imagining and thus describing God, especially with regard to gender. And especially with regard to the tendency to anthropomorphize God – to attribute human descriptors to a divine and inherently, ultimately, mysterious presence.

It is not an approach without its flaws, but it is an intentional effort to acknowledge the power of language to shape theology and religious polity and practice.

We try, at Calvary, to use language for God – and in general – that does not necessarily limit YOUR understanding of who God is and how God functions in your life. And that does not limit YOUR understanding of whose lives matter to God.

Language matters. Language is powerful.

Sometimes, including here with Gafney's translation of the Psalm, we instead use "expansive" language for God – an approach that likewise means to avoid limiting how we see and understand God. But rather than avoiding gender-specific language, it expands the tradition of masculine-only language.

So instead of hearing “God of All” we hear “Mother of All.” And instead of “God Who Is Holy,” “She Who Is Holy.”

This approach has a way of jumpstarting our theological imaginations. And again, this approach is also intentional about expanding the language we encounter in scripture and in liturgy more generally.

So notice in Gafney's translation that Israel's ancestral legacy is matrilineal – so instead of “All you offspring of Jacob,” we hear “All the offspring of Leah and Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpah, glorify her. Stand in awe of her all of you of Rebekah's line.”

That is a striking and powerful difference for all of us. Language matters.

Gafney's focus is on a lectionary that makes women and girls more visible, that uses feminine language for God and centers women's stories and agency in the context of an exclusively androcentric and male-focused tradition. And she readily acknowledges the mixed reactions to this approach, writing that it “will inevitably seem strange to some hearers and readers. Some will find it welcome and a signifier of inclusion. Some will find it discordant and I invite those to think deeply about what that discomfiture signifies. And some will find the language in these volumes insufficiently inclusive, particularly with regard to nonbinary and a-gender pronouns.”

That said, I pray that our engagement with such translations and the use of both inclusive and expansive language in our shared worship will open and inspire all of our theological and applied theological imaginations. And if you have any questions or concerns or whatever, please, let's talk about it!

Deal? Deal.

OK. So after all that, again, believe it or not, that's not what I'm here to preach about this morning. The story from Matthew's gospel is our focus.

Retired pastor, teacher and author, Barbara Brown Taylor, calls it the “miracle on the beach.” The miracle being the apparently spontaneous decision of four fishermen, fisher folk, to drop everything, to leave EVERYTHING behind, to follow Jesus.

I don't know about you, but it seems like just yesterday that we were celebrating Jesus' miraculous birth. Then his transcendent baptism. And now Matthew, like all the Gospels except Luke, skips right past Jesus' formative years – his childhood, the awkward adolescence, all that – to Jesus as the leader of a movement.

The Jesus who just before our reading shares the first recorded words of his public preaching, "Repent, for the realm of heaven has come near."

It's always fascinating, I think, to consider the differences between the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life.

Only in Matthew and Luke do we get birth narratives, though admittedly very different in their content and emphases. Matthew, Mark and Luke – the so-called "synoptic Gospels" because of their similarities, in sharp contrast to John – feature Jesus' baptism and temptation in the desert.

Matthew and Mark, with much of the same language in common, highlight that first teaching about repentance and the realm of God coming near, whereas Luke marks the start of Jesus' public ministry and teaching in the synagogue, quoting Isaiah: "The Spirit of the (Holy One) is upon me, because (God) has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. (God) has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of (God's) favor." John kicks off with the wedding miracle at Cana, turning water into wine.

And all four Gospels introduce John the Baptist as Jesus' predecessor, preparing the way for Jesus. The differences continue.

Here in Matthew, the focus of this year's Lectionary cycle, Jesus is off and running. He's born, he's baptized, he's tempted in the desert and now he's busy recruiting disciples for the movement.

We heard John's version last week, also beginning with the brothers Simon Peter and Andrew. But unlike in John, in Matthew – as in Mark – Jesus finds them at work, casting

their nets into the Sea of Galilee to catch fish. John doesn't even identify them as fishermen, though this is a CRITICALLY important detail as we'll get to in a bit.

Remember that Jesus has had no public ministry to this point, as far as we know, beyond the invitation to repent for the coming kingdom. We don't know what, if anything, these brothers know or have heard about Jesus.

Jesus doesn't even introduce himself. He doesn't so much as say hello or offer a friendly greeting to these strangers.

This, for the record, is not a sound community-organizing strategy! Imagine going door-to-door or phone banking with POWER, and saying only this, ONLY this: "Follow me and I will get you involved in work for racial and economic justice."

But that's exactly what Jesus does! His call, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote, is "void of all content." He ONLY says, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

And note in the translation Gafney's clarifying addition of "women, children and men," countering the traditional phrasing of "fish for men." Language matters, even if "men" is meant to imply everyone. Language matters.

With Jesus' simple, or at least simply stated, invitation to follow him, we're also told that Simon Peter and Andrew answer the call by doing just that!

There is no hesitation. What. So. Ever.

There is no follow-up with clarifying questions: "So, could you maybe say a little more about what you mean by that? And, by the way, who are you?"

There is no request for time to think about it or consult with anyone, including each other: "Thanks for the invitation, whoever you are, but as you can see, we're kind of busy right now. So could we maybe get back to you next week?"

The brothers Zebedee and fellow fisherfolk, James and John, are also out fishing – actually out on the boat WITH their father when Jesus comes calling. And they don't even take time, apparently, to consult him.

They just leave their boat and their father behind, just as Simon Peter and Andrew promptly drop their nets, to follow.

We celebrate such a bold demonstration of faith, but let's be honest, it's INSANE! Their response is absolutely mind-boggling.

Understand that the Gospels, like all of the scriptural texts, are written with a literary purpose, edited for both content and audience. It would actually be refreshing, and frankly, far more relatable, to hear all the other encounters Jesus SURELY must have had out on the recruiting trail.

"Follow me."

"Umm, no thanks." Putting your hand up like you do when someone tries to hand you a flier on the street.

Or "Listen, man, I'm working here. I don't know you who are or what you're up to or what makes you think it's OK to bother me at work, but leave me alone. I don't have time for all that. I need to get back to work."

That is what we would expect. That is how we would respond to such a mysterious and impromptu invitation. Right?

So the question is, why don't Simon Peter and Andrew? Why don't James and John?

Why DO they immediately drop everything, leave everything behind? Their livelihoods (including their equipment) and way of life, their families, their responsibilities and obligations. EVERYTHING!

It IS, again as Barbara Brown Taylor suggests, a miracle. Maybe Jesus' first miracle, before turning water into wine.

First, it's important for us to understand that Jesus is addressing specific people in a specific context. He says, "Follow me, and I will make you FISH for people" to people who make their living by fishing. And, in fact, are actively fishing when he approaches them.

Never mind what a terrible metaphor “fishing for people” is to describe actual interaction with people, considering, as we have before at Calvary, what fishing is like from the perspective of the fish. The image itself is paralleled in Jeremiah, written in the context of exile, and is associated with judgment between those who have turned from God and those who have not.

In any case, to understand Jesus’ call we have to understand the context of fishing in 1st century Palestine.

This was not autonomous subsistence fishing. Biblical historians, including biblical scholar Ched Myers, note that these fishermen were functioning within an oppressive and exploitative economic caste system. Think of them as cogs in a factory fishing enterprise – the lowest of the low professions.

Again, we don’t know what these four know about Jesus before he comes calling – except that word about him and his reputation has surely spread, including his pronouncement to “Repent, for the realm of God has come near.” Is at hand.

Even using such language like realm – from the Greek word, *basileia*, also meaning reign, kingdom, empire – is provocative, to say the least. As we clearly saw with King Herod’s fearful and violent reaction to the baby Jesus, already hailed by some as the “King of the Judeans.” A competing king. A threat to power.

As one commentary describes it, using the phrase “realm of heaven” or “realm of God” “puts Jesus in conspicuous tension with the Roman empire in Matthew’s larger story. ... Within the *basileia* of tyranny and violence, Jesus comes of age ... (H)e steps into his public ministry and delivers his first sermon: ‘Repent, for the *basileia* of heaven’ – not of Caesar or Herod! – “has come near.’”

So even if that’s all these four fishermen knew about Jesus, GIVEN their oppressive context it’s easy to understand why they might be more than ready to move on. To drop their nets and leave behind their boats, and leave behind a caste system and join this Jesus in bringing, even closer, a different way of being, of living, of loving.

None other than the “realm of heaven.”

Ched Myers points out that the Greek verb translated as “they LEFT their nets” – *aphiemi* – is also used in the context of leaving behind debt or bondage or sin. It’s what Myers calls a “Jubilee verb” – in reference to the Jewish concept of Jubilee, a corporate practice of economic, cultural, environmental and communal reset and restoration as a way to right previous wrongs and ensure a fluidity of justice for both the people and the land.

So consider that these would-be disciples, with Jesus’ invitation to follow him toward this new realm, this new way, are simply – albeit boldly and without hesitation – stepping into the possibility and promise of Jubilee. It is a profound act of faith, but it also a profound act of hope.

Not just for themselves, but for everyone. They are used to fishing for themselves, for their families, but Jesus’ call to them is to fish for people, for ALL people. To spread their nets much farther than they ever have before.

And as important as it is for us to understand the context of these fishermen, it’s as important – maybe even more important – to understand that THIS is where, and with whom, Jesus begins to gather together his rag-tag band of disciples.

He DOES NOT GO to the halls of political power. He DOES NOT GO to king’s palace or to the synagogues where the religious leaders are. He hits the streets, where the people are. Where people are working and struggling within an unjust and corrupt political and religious structure.

And while he will eventually recruit those who benefit within the structure – a tax collector, for example – he starts here, very intentionally, by seeking out those who are oppressed within that structure. Those who fully understand, in their lives, the consequence of maintaining the status quo.

And he calls THEM to be leaders of a movement. That, to be sure, is at the very heart of good community-organizing strategy. That is where people power begins and how change happens.

Jesus is a community organizer, and his call is for wholesale social change. A revolution of values, and both political and religious policy. Jesus' call is to change individual ways of being and living and loving in order to participate in, and align with, collective and transformative social change. Systems change. For the common good.

That's the movement he calls these four fishermen to join in inviting them to follow him, a prophetic movement that's about – again, as Luke's gospel proclaims – bringing good news to the poor and release to the captives. Letting the oppressed go free.

To be clear, this is NOT an invitation – for them or for us – to a life of personal, navel-gazing piety. It is a call, a divine CALL, to a shared life of radical hospitality and generosity and grace to mirror God's own. It is a call to live and love more deeply and widely – together, in community – into the world as God intends.

Of course, Simon Peter and Andrew, and James and John, don't know all that at this point in the story. They don't know what it will cost Jesus, and what it will cost them, to follow in this way.

But even to respond as they did initially comes with cost. So for now, we rightly celebrate their willingness to go. In faith and in hope, to take a step toward the divine promise of a better way. With no instruction. No program. No platform. With everything to gain, and everything to lose.

It IS hard to imagine responding as those first disciples did. The bar is admittedly set high, perhaps especially for those of us who do benefit from, who are privileged in any way within, the social, political and religious status quo. The way things are.

But the questions remain, Jesus' call remains for today, in this moment, and for our ongoing reflection and discernment. And the questions and the call demands our answer.

What nets are God calling you to drop? What boats are God calling you to leave behind? What changes do you need to make in your life, what choices, in your familiar, day-to-day life, to love more deeply and consistently?

To participate more fully in our shared work of kingdom-building, our shared work of justice-organizing and peace-making?

To lean more intentionally into the divine promise of justice and kindness and Jubilee?

Follow me, Jesus says. Follow me.

May it be so.