

New Year; New You 3) Illuminated by the Light

Matthew 4:12-23 • January 26, 2020 • Epiphany Series: New Year, New You



Imagine joining the people in northern Europe a few years ago when 220 people ice fishing had their pan of ice break away into the sea! Helicopters had to move in to rescue them. What started as an ice-fishing expedition ended as a rescue operation. I'm not sure I can think of any hard-core anglers who would enjoy those types of excursions. Or how about those young students who went cave exploring in Thailand a few years back? What seemed to be a fun adventure ended up a frightening escape from darkness and almost certain death by drowning. Would you follow that team leader into his next venture? What about Jesus' calling to fish? He invites his disciples to follow him and learn to become fishers of people. Only it's not a leisurely fishing expedition. We see that it is a rescue mission on dark and dangerous waters. What would it take to motivate you to join such an outing? This morning we continue our series on "A New You" and we see that Jesus illuminates us so that we are ready to follow him and join his mission even into the darkest places.

That uneasy feeling about fishing had to be filling the minds of Jesus' disciples when they first called him to be "fishers of men." James and John had been disciples of John the Baptist. John pointed them and Peter and Andrew to see Jesus. They had learned from Jesus and now spent some time with him. But something happened that you can imagine really shook up the waters and scared the fish. John, who had been preaching and baptizing people in the Jordan river was thrown into prison. The fisherman who had caught the hearts of many people, including Peter, Andrew, James and John, was himself caught in a net.

Herod had imprisoned him because John was preaching about repentance and preaching against the sin of sexual immorality. You can probably imagine the effect this had on those four men. We don't hear of them taking up John's message and preaching. We don't hear of them wanting to get arrested themselves. The dark sinful world seemed to win the day. John was rotting in prison. Eventually John would be beheaded by Herod. So what did those four men do? We find them back at home. They are once again active in the family business, fishing in Galilee. When we realize that these men were disciples of John and had also traveled and spent time with Jesus, don't we stand a little disappointed that they were no longer following Jesus but acting as if nothing had happened? "Let's get back home and just get back to life as usual."

The work of God's people is like that. When we want to preach his Word or follow his Word the devil will seek to scare us into scattering and not supporting God's Kingdom. How many times throughout history hasn't someone called out with God's Word to touch the hearts of others like John did, only to have those whom they touched turn aside at the first sign of difficulty or danger? Christians, Disciples of Christ live in a dark world. Disciples are asked to work in a dark world. Disciples, therefore, don't always act like a disciple. The Christian teenager who is confronted for his "close-minded" attitude ends up pretending he isn't Christian—at least until the teammates stop teasing him. The Christian waitress is afraid to respond back "Merry Christmas" because she thinks the table next to her will not leave a good tip if they hear. Being a disciple means shining different in a dark world. Wouldn't you rather just avoid all the persecution, pain, or problems because you follow God's Word? These men did.

But then steps up Jesus. He knows that disciples must fish in dark waters. What does he do as soon as he hears about John's imprisonment? He heads to a dark land. It says that he goes up toward Galilee of the Gentiles. The northern portion of Israel had long had a reputation for having a much less godly people. Way back in Isaiah's time it was the "Galilee of the Gentiles" as it followed the influence and ways of the nations outside of Israel. Furthermore after Isaiah's time this name would only grow because the invading nations would bring foreign people to settle there. These foreigners also worshiped foreign gods. Further from Jerusalem and further steeped in the darkness of a sinful world, Galilee wasn't necessarily the ideal place for Jesus to go fishing. But prophecy was fulfilled as he steps up and continues right where John left off. John had been preaching "repent for the kingdom of heaven is near." Now it says Jesus began to preach "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near." Jesus, you see, did not avoid the darkness.

What did Jesus do to fish in these dark lands? He preached repentance. This is not something you would become popular preaching in a sinful world. It landed John in prison. By nature everyone hates the idea of repentance. Repentance means not just you made a mistake. Repentance means admitting that you've rebelled in a wicked way against God! Repentance is an acknowledgement of guilt before God! The sinful nature hates that idea! Try telling someone that they have sinned and see what happens. The immediate reaction will nearly always be resentment, anger, and hostility. That's why Herod and the woman he committed adultery with hated John. That's why when you speak up and tell someone they have done something that offends God they don't like it. That's why your own heart recoils back at the word "repentance." Admitting sin, confessing we deserve punishment is against every natural grain in our body. "Everyone who does what is evil hates the light and will not come into it for fear that their evil deeds will be exposed." Repentance means that there is a higher authority over us. Repentance means that we are accountable and have failed. Preaching this means preaching that we deserve God's wrath over sin!

But there is another aspect of this preaching. Repentance includes more than confessing sin in shame and despair. There is another side to repentance that makes it a wonderful thing in God's kingdom. You and I don't need to hate the word or recoil at the thought of "repentance." Why? Repentance is only a bad thing if God is not merciful. But repentance means turning away from sin, admitting guilt, and turning to God, looking for mercy. Repentance means basically saying "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." And the preaching of disciples is like that of Jesus. He was preaching "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near...(vs 23) preaching the good news of the kingdom of heaven." The call to repentance is made because it is the only way to deal with sin and its darkness that results in a good outcome. Repentance is what the Christian church is all about because forgiveness is what we are all about. Disciples of Jesus proclaim this good news "You have sinned, all have sinned, but all are freely forgiven who trust in Jesus!" God has had mercy! God forgives your wickedness, rebellion, and sin. It doesn't matter how great the call to repentance is, murder, adultery, false worship, God's forgiveness is freely given. That's the good news disciples of Jesus preach! Disciples Fish in a Dark world Preaching Good News!

Finding Peter and Andrew Jesus says to them "Come, follow me. And I will make you fishers of people." They went from having a fishing business to being about the business of God's kingdom. They now had a call from Christ! So it is today. You see pastors, teachers, and leaders in God's church who all serve. What pastor wouldn't rather be out on the lake fishing than being a fisher of men unless God hadn't called them and changed their hearts? Teachers in Christian churches and schools have the call of God to teach. This is why they do it. Still today through his Word and his Church Christ calls people to serve in his kingdom and preach and teach his Word. When a congregation says "Come, preach and teach" it is still the call of Christ today through his body, the church.

That call begins with this "Follow me." The call to be a disciple and work in God's kingdom begins with first learning God's Word. That's why it is so important that as our church body prepares hearts and minds for serving in the kingdom we instruct them with God's Word. That's why a portion of our offering each week goes to support worker training. We use our offerings to help not only extend the invitation to serve but to first "Follow Jesus." That's why the disciples would spend so much time learning from Jesus. That's why we spend so many hours in our worker training college and our seminary teaching the Word of God.

And those disciples who are called to fish cast the Word of God. That is the tool they are to use. When Jesus says "I will make you fishers of people." He won't send them out with business degrees. He won't send them out with swords and armor. He won't even be sending out his fishermen with the latest technology and sonar radar for fishing. He sends them with the only tool they need to fish: The Word to preach and teach.

But how could they do it? These weren't trained preachers. They were fishermen from Galilee with thick Galilean accents. They had no formal school training and weren't like the scribes or scholars of their time. Jesus didn't have to pick the wise or learned. God doesn't rely on human wisdom or strength for his fishermen. Consider what we read earlier as the apostle Paul describes were God's fishermen look for strength and what God's people ought to rely on as they go out casting nets: For Christ (sent me) to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

And it is that same Word that motivates him to serve. AT ONCE.... IMMEDIATELY they left and followed him. No hesitation. When they understood that God loved them so much, that Jesus was there, the Son of God in human flesh, how could they not be driven by his love? When they considered that the man walking and preaching among them was the one who would face the darkest night to free us all from guilt—how could they not respond with confidence and joy? When they later were fishing and they once again heard the risen and living Jesus who had paid for their sins say once more "feed my lambs" they went out boldly. They had followed him. They would fish now for him who died for them and rose again.

I heard a story from a man who was with a group that worked on bringing the hope of the gospel to those who had been caught in the trap of sex trafficking. Young woman who cannot understand or see any hope in their life. Someone challenged him if he was making a difference. "You know, all that work you do to rescue these young women and for what? You aren't making any difference. When you rescue one woman don't you know that the sex traffickers will just abduct or seduce another to fill their place? You can't win." You know what that man's response was? "Don't ask me. I'm not qualified to say whether or not I'm making a difference. You want to know if it is worth it? You'll have to ask one of those who has been rescued to a new life. You can ask them if what I'm doing is worth it.

Jesus calls workers to the harvest. He calls people from within his flock to go out and cast nets. He calls young men to be pastors and young men and women to follow him to become pastors and teachers. He calls those who already have a job to consider the calling to full-time gospel ministry. That doesn't have to be you. But you are the voice calling workers. You can be like Zebedee the father of James and John and recognize it is worth-while for your son or daughter to serve God's kingdom full time. You can be the one who encourages someone who is considering full time ministry. It is worth it.

Jesus wasn't out on a leisurely trip to see how many disciples he could get. It was a different fishing excursion. And he wasn't recruiting workers to just try an afternoon on the water. He was recruiting rescue workers and bringing light to illuminate the darkness.