

The Call: Matthew 4:12 – 23

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The photo was the cover of the Book of Common Prayer, the red book right there in your pews. Do you see it? Now picture it as I saw it in the photo, with these words written in the air above that gold cross on the front cover: We are Episcopalians, and if you are not, but instead belong to some other denomination, then in our minds you are ...

What do you think comes next? What was written below the cross? You are welcome? "Not as good as us?" "Forgiven?" No. None of the above.

We are Episcopalians, and if you are not, but instead belong to some other denomination, then in our minds you are ...our brother or sister in Christ.

My first experience with the Episcopal Church was on a trip to London in 1980. Our first full day there was Easter Sunday, and so we went to St. Paul's for the morning service. It was packed. We sat way in the back, and I don't remember much about the service except that it wasn't very different from the Roman Catholic ones that I grew up with, but when it was time to receive communion, something clicked. We were directed to a side altar, where we received not only the wafer but were offered a chalice with wine, and both the bread and the wine were administered by women. One of them was a nun. That was different for me. The nuns in the Roman Catholic Church didn't do anything like that. As wonderful as it was to celebrate Easter at St. Paul's, because of the crowd I wasn't able to appreciate the awesome beauty of that holy space.

That evening, we went to see Westminster Abbey, and our experience was quite different. We were greeted by a man in a red jacket, who gently and quietly asked us, "Are you here as tourists or have you come for evening prayer?"

"For prayer," we immediately answered, and we were escorted away from the nave to a side chapel that was behind a screen. We sat down, picked up the Book of Common Prayer, and the service began. It was a lovely,

quiet service in the discreetly lighted space, and Thomas Cranmer's words poured over me and filled my soul. When it came time for the sermon, the preacher ascended into an elaborately carved pulpit that seemed almost as high as heaven itself, and proceeded to share thoughts and teachings that resonated with me, joining intellect with soul. I don't remember that sermon now, but I strongly remember that I felt like I'd come home.

I didn't "see" much of Westminster Abbey that evening, but I did take a tour on our last morning in London. It is an awesome space, where history is palpable, and I hope to go back there some day. When I do, I will be sure to attend the evening prayer service.

Upon returning home from our trip, I didn't immediately seek out the Episcopal Church. Instead, I continued my exploration of some of the more fundamental, evangelical denominations, and finally settled back into the Roman Catholic faith in which I had been raised because, in the end, it was the liturgy that spoke to me. Oh, and the fact that I had been baptized when I was two weeks old by a priest who was my grandfather's first cousin, who had married my grandparents and baptized all of their children, including my mother, and who was like a second grandfather to our family - there was no way that I was going to join a church that told me that my infant baptism didn't count because it wasn't full immersion!

Years passed, and I was going through the pain of divorce, and I needed God in a new way. I felt God calling me out of the marriage that I had entered into at such a young age, yet the church I was attending wasn't being supportive or pastoral, and I needed God to walk with me through this difficult time.

I remembered that evening prayer service at Westminster Abbey, and the marriage of intellect and soul that made me feel I'd come home. There was an Episcopal Church in town, so I thought I'd try it.

One fateful Sunday morning, I walked out of my apartment and crossed the street right in front of the catholic church that I'd not only attended but where I served as a music minister, leading the psalms and responses. It felt very odd. I

turned the corner and was halfway down the block when I stopped. What was I doing? I could still turn back and go to my old, familiar church. At that very moment, the Episcopal Church bell rang, calling worshipers to the service.

“Okay, God,” I said. “You want me there.” I continued the last two blocks to the sweet, small, Victorian church – which was also named St. Luke’s, like this one.

My heart sank as I approached the front of the building. The acolytes and choir were lined up outside the door. “I’m too late,” I thought. “I can’t go in there now.” Then I noticed the priest: It was a woman, wearing the green chasuble of Ordinary Time and white high heels and dangly coin earrings. “I’m not ready for this,” I thought. While I supported the idea of women priests, I wasn’t quite ready to deal with one in person.

On the heels of this thought, the priest turned around, smiled, and called out, “You’re just in time!”

There was no turning back now.

I sat at the back of the church and tried not to talk to anyone. I worked in the town library back then, and had taught nursery school for several years before that, and I was so afraid that someone would recognize me and start asking personal questions. It was a pretty small town, after all, and news can travel fast in some circles. I left as quickly as I could when the service was over.

Well. Someone did recognize me. It was the mother of two of my former nursery school students, who practically accosted me at the town pool the following Tuesday when she called out, “That was either you or your twin sister I saw at St. Luke’s on Sunday!” I was caught. But it was okay, because she shared with me how wonderful her church was and how much it meant to her, and told me that her children would be handing out the service bulletins at the door on Sunday and that they hoped to see me.

Well, they did see me. I went back because someone was waiting for me, and I felt like I’d come home once again, just like at that evening prayer service, and here I am.

Now let’s flip back in time about 2000 years and look at the story in the gospel from Matthew.

On the surface, Jesus moves away from his home town after he learns that John the Baptist has been arrested. He moves to the beach – something I think we can relate to in New Jersey! One day, he is walking along the beach when he sees two brothers, Andrew and Simon, casting their nets into the sea. They are fishermen. “Follow me,” says Jesus, “and I will make you fish for people.” They immediately drop their nets and follow him. Then, as he continued his walk along the beach, he saw two other brothers, James and John, in the boat with their father Zebedee. They were mending their nets. Jesus called to them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Taken at face value, the story as written here feels to me a little like a scene from the Walking Dead: Jesus walks along the beach, picks two people who drop everything and follow along behind him, and then does it again. Forgive me, but I have this cartoon in my mind of Jesus being followed by four zombies staggering along the beach! So let's put the story in context and find all the things that were NOT in today's gospel reading. Let's find the backstory.

Here's what's happened so far: Jesus has gone to the Jordan River to be baptized by his cousin John, and when he comes up out of the water, soaking wet, possibly gasping for breath, he is overpowered by the Holy Spirit and hears the voice of God. That is so overwhelming that he flees into the wilderness to pray, to seek God's path for him. We know that after a good deal of time there – 40 days, perhaps, or perhaps some immeasurable amount of time that is represented by 40 days – he goes home to Nazareth and lives there again. But when he learns that his cousin John has been arrested, he is troubled and realizes that it's time, time to move on with his life and his ministry, and so he moves to the beach, to Capernaum, by the Sea of Galilee, and begins to preach repentance, as John did. It's almost as if he took up John the Baptist's cause, as a way of coping with his own grief over John's arrest, for he knows that it can come to no good.

But before John's arrest, something else had happened: John had continued preaching and baptizing while Jesus was in the wilderness, and one day he was talking with two disciples when he saw Jesus walking past in the distance.

“Look,” he said to the two disciples, “there goes the Lamb of God, the one I told you about.”

Well, as we heard in the Gospel of John last week, one of those two disciples was Andrew, and he was intrigued. He and the other disciple followed after Jesus, and caught up to him, and said, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” “Come and see,” said Jesus, and so they went with him and hung out at his place, talking and sharing, but first, Andrew ran to get his brother Simon and brought him along, too. And so the three disciples spent the evening talking and sharing with Jesus at his place, probably sharing a meal as well.

So, on the day when Jesus was walking along the beach at the Sea of Galilee, he knew where he was going. He’d already met Andrew and Simon, whom he called Peter, and it’s just possible that the other disciple who had been with Andrew was either James or John. They were fishermen along the same shore. Of course they knew each other, and they knew one another’s boats and the other fishermen in their families. Fishing is a dangerous occupation, and fishermen look out for one another.

So Jesus walked along the shore searching until he found Andrew and Simon Peter. He knew, after the evening they had spent together, that these two were seeking God and wanted to follow the Messiah, the Christ. He knew that they were called to help him teach people about the Kingdom of God in a way that wouldn’t leave time for daily fishing. He looked for Andrew and Peter and he found them and called to them, and they knew that they’d come home, spiritually and intellectually, and so they left their nets and their boat and went with Jesus, who continued walking along the beach until he found that other disciple – James or John – with his brother, and Jesus called to them to come, too, and they also knew that this was what they were meant to do, and so they left their father – which sounds like a pretty big deal, for their father was naturally older than they and might have had difficulty fishing for a livelihood on his own – but they left him with the boat, and, hopefully with his blessing, went with Jesus and spent their time helping him and learning from him as Jesus went into the synagogues in that area to preach and teach and heal.

We know that they didn't leave fishing forever – not yet – for at the end of John's gospel we hear the story of how, after Jesus had died and rose from the dead, they were fishing with no luck, no catch, until once again Jesus called to them from the shore and had them cast their nets once more, and cooked breakfast for them on the beach in the early morning hours before taking a walk with Peter – a walk that changed Peter's life forever. So Jesus called them twice, and both times they were doing the work of their ordinary, everyday lives, and both times Jesus showed them what else God wanted them to do.

And what does this mean for us, today? How are we called to do the work God has given us to do, and how has that changed through the years? How are we called to worship together as Episcopalians, or, as our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry so often says, "in the Episcopal Branch of the Jesus Movement?"

Another thing Bishop Curry reminds us to do is, when reading Scripture, to read the lines and then "read between the lines," asking ourselves, how does this story about Jesus connect to the same story in other gospels, and to other stories about Jesus? What is the context in which this particular story happens – what came before it and where does it go from here? Where do the things that happen in this story happen elsewhere in Scripture?

We learn from these stories, about God, about Jesus, about the Kingdom of God, and how the Holy Spirit is present in our lives. These stories transcend time because they contain truth. The gospels were written, not as literal biographies, but to tell stories that contain truth and that lead us to think about God, and they are no less true because they are not literal. Some of us may carry facts in our heads, but we all carry stories in our hearts, and these stories about how it was when Jesus walked the earth and shared teaching, and healing with the people should resonate in our hearts. We should not take them at face value, in isolation, or we may misunderstand, oversimplify, and perhaps see zombies on the beach. Instead, we are called to explore them, to use God's gift of imagination to study them and see what they reveal.

We are all called in life – throughout our lives – in many ways, and more than once. We are called to the work that we do in the world, serving others in the jobs that we do. We are called to raise our children, to care for our pets, to serve our friends and neighbors and coworkers and fellow citizens.

Jesus formed a community of disciples, and that tells us that we are called to worship God in community, and for us here today, that community is here, at St. Luke's in Gladstone.

Note that Jesus chose two sets of brothers. I think there is a message there, too. Jesus gave a new image of family that goes beyond blood to embrace like-minded seekers of God. We are family.

Does that mean that the disciples were all in agreement? No, not always. Paul's letter to the Corinthians testifies to that. He asked those in Corinth that there be no division among them, that all be united in Christ. That sounds like zombies again, with everyone the same, thinking the same, no disagreement. But I wonder – if we all think alike and act alike and think in exactly the same way, wouldn't it get boring? Are we not challenged to be one in spirit and yet disagree? I think we are, and I think that the other stories in the gospels reveal this to us.

Consider the woman at the well, who challenged Jesus when he broke the rules and spoke to her.

Consider the Canaanite woman who asked him to heal her daughter, and persisted when he ignored her. He was following the rules this time and didn't speak to her, a strange woman and a foreigner, but he spoke to his disciples, telling them that he was sent only for the lost sheep of Israel, and still she persisted, and he told her that it wouldn't be right to take bread from the children and give it to the dogs, to which she retorted, "Even dogs beg for crumbs from the master's table." End result: Jesus healed her daughter, and this story shows us that even Jesus was able to learn and grow during his time on earth.

We don't have to agree on everything. We don't have to think alike. To be united in Christ means that we don't let our differences get in the way of our relationships.

God calls us to celebrate our differences because that is how we grow, but also to come together with open hearts and listening ears, knowing that we are grounded in God's Love and that ultimately, whatever we do, whether we run for political office or march for the civil rights of women and the underserved, or protect someone in danger or feed the hungry or teach the children or sing and worship with those who are differently abled, whatever we do and wherever we are, we are called to respect the dignity of every human being.

We don't have to change our minds or our opinions, but we are called to change our hearts. God comes to us, seeks us, calls us, not to grant us happily ever after, but to bring us with all our differences and disagreements to the Kingdom of God. Jake Owensby, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Western Louisiana, says that God calls us to embrace the people we are with, as messy as that may be. That is the Kingdom of God.

Bishop Owensby also says that asking where people find God these days is the wrong question. He says we should ask, "Where does God find us?" and he is right, for look again at Matthew's gospel: Jesus came out to the beach to find Andrew and Peter and James and John. He didn't wait for them to go find him – he came to them, and he comes to us, too, wherever we are in our ordinary, everyday lives. He comes to call us to follow his way, to bring the Kingdom of God to those who don't know it or can't see it. He calls us to worship in community, where we can strengthen one another in our doubts and in our beliefs, where we can agree to disagree and learn from each other what it is like to walk in someone else's shoes.

Jesus called me using an usher in a red jacket, and the chime of church bells, and a woman priest with high heels and dangly coin earrings who called out, "You're just in time!" Jesus called me using the mother who called out to me at the town pool.

He called me to a new life that included a community of brothers and sisters of all ages and backgrounds who taught me how to grow in my spiritual life, how to serve God's



people, how to listen to someone in need, and how to agree to disagree and still love one another. God doesn't wait for us to come to church. God seeks us out, calling to us using the people we are with, as messy as that may be, and God uses us to call others to the Kingdom of God.

Sharing the good news of God's Kingdom doesn't mean you have to be on television or on the street corner or knocking on doors. Sometimes evangelism happens right where you are, at your kid's basketball game or the local pizza place or at the office. Sometimes it happens when you serve as an usher or an acolyte or a Sunday School teacher. When you are called to the Kingdom of God, evangelism happens wherever you are, doing the work God has given you to do, and sometimes you are doing it and don't even realize that you are one step in someone else's journey to Christ.

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