

Epiphany 3 January 22, 2023

Matthew 4:12-23

Isaiah 9:1-4

Pastor Ann Hultquist

One of our bishops who serves in the midwest reflected recently about having to attend a defensive driving course at the insistence of the state of Iowa. He had received three speeding tickets in one year; a personal record he wasn't all that proud of. Off he went to a few weeks of Saturday morning classes, to be instructed in the finer points of obeying the law.

Some of the people in the class were unhappy to be there--really, really unhappy. He sat quietly in the back of the room, keeping his head down and his mouth shut. Then the instructor started calling on people: "Who are you? What do you do? Why are you here?"

"My name is Mike," he answered when it was his turn. "I'm a pastor. I drive too fast" Confession, for all the world to hear.

At the end of class, the instructor took him aside: "Why are you here?" he asked. "Because I got three speeding tickets."

"No, really, *why* are you here? Where are you going?"

"Well, the first time I was driving to..." The instructor interrupted him: "No, really--where are you *going* so fast? *Where are you going?*" Used to asking the existential questions, Mike realized he was being invited to answer one himself.

It's a question that most of us have asked ourselves a time or two in life, at different ages and different stages, as we try to figure out how to plan our short or long-term future and decide just who we want to be.

"Where are you going?!" Can you hear Zebedee shouting after John and James? It was an ordinary morning; they were fixing the nets after a night of fishing, and out of nowhere up walks this man who says "Come on, follow me." His two sensible sons, bound to him by culture and faith, look at one another, drop the net, and start walking away. "Where are you going?!" Zebedee calls.

Do James and John shrug and keep walking? Do they turn around and yell “We’ve got no idea” or “We’ll be back”? The Bible doesn’t tell us that part. Over the centuries, people have tried to fill in the blanks in the story: How could Peter and James and John just go? Well, interpreters have said, “they must have already heard about Jesus, so they were ready; or maybe they had even talked with him before.” But imagining previous conversations takes away the urgency of this moment doesn’t it? “Immediately” the Gospel writer says. “Immediately they left their nets and followed.”

Fishing was back breaking labor, throwing nets out of the boat and hauling them back in, always at night. The Sea of Galilee could be unpredictable and stormy, the catch of fish never guaranteed. Whole families were involved, including women and children, because fish had to be cleaned and dried in the sun to provide for themselves, to be sold in the market, and to fulfill contracts they had with the Roman occupiers. Their soldiers and government had to be fed, after all. Imagine that--it’s your ancestral land, your waters, your hard work--and in order to live you have to feed people who are making your life miserable. You might love the sun, the lake; you might even love fishing--but in the end...you were going nowhere.

So it’s not too hard to imagine that when Jesus walked by they dropped everything and went. The invitation: “Come, follow me, we’ll fish for people” sounded like *hope*--hope that life could be different, hope that their lives and the lives of others had value. Do you think they had any idea what they were getting into? Of course not! Jesus didn’t hand them a manual called “Discipleship 101”. And even if Jesus had, they wouldn’t have understood it. They just took those first steps on the beach into whatever was to come.

“Where are you going?” It’s a deep question for a dreary January Sunday morning, but if you’ve asked it of yourself a time or two, I bet sitting in worship is one of the places you’ve asked it. Stories of faith, the words of Jesus, music, our own confession, the wonder of water, bread and wine--have a way of opening us up. The prayers we pray for help or guidance, our wondering about how we can serve in the world, about what our congregation might do are all wrapped up in that question: Where are you going?

Sometimes as people of faith we answer that question in ways that aren't all that helpful. "God has a plan," people say, or we think--believing that each moment, every choice has already been mapped out. All we have to do is figure out what that plan is and we'll be on the right path. Really?! Listening to the stories of scripture, listening deeply to our own stories show how false that narrative is. God *does* have a plan-- "to gather up all things in Christ," as the writer of Ephesians puts it. But how we live that involves dead-ends, poor choices, love, freedom, some convoluted pathways, and grace, so much grace. That's the joy and gift and the challenge of faith, isn't it?

Our journey with Jesus begins in the water of baptism, where we are named Child of God forever and hear that first invitation "Follow me." That invitation comes again and again, doesn't it? Daily, even, from the One who loves us on the journey: "Come follow me. Let's see what we can do together."