

January 22, 2023  
Matthew 4:12-23

Epiphany 3  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## **“Back on Course”**

“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

Many of us have come to rely on our Global Positioning System devices to guide us to our destinations, especially if it is to a place where we have never travelled. This past summer, I used by GPS on our trips to New Brunswick and New Jersey and found it very helpful in navigating to the places we were staying. My GPS also warns me of upcoming traffic jams and recommends alternate routes to avoid being delayed. While I still like using maps to plot out our trips, the GPS has been a great innovation in making sure that we arrive at our desired location safely.

But I must confess that while I rely on my GPS a lot, there are times when I find myself disagreeing with it. This happens when I am in a place where I have some familiarity with the roads, and the GPS recommends I take a route that I choose not to take. When I take a turn that is not the one the voice in the GPS recommends, I often here a voice announcing that the GPS is “recalculating,” recommending a way to get back on the route it wants me to take. This has even led to me arguing with my GPS about the route I intend to take – yes, I have argued with a machine! But there have been other times when I am thankful for the vigilance of my GPS, because quite often I have taken a wrong turn or gone down a road that is taking me away from my destination, and if it were not for the GPS getting me back on course I might get hopelessly lost.

Many of us have had experiences of taking a wrong turn and finding ourselves on an unfamiliar road. Before the invention of the GPS, this might mean stopping for directions, or pulling off to the side of the road and studying our maps. If we were handy with a compass, we might look for the direction of our destination and try to find our way back on course by this means. Even the best navigator can find themselves on the wrong path and having someone assist them getting back on course can save them time and avoid finding themselves in unfamiliar and even perilous situations.

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus begins his journeys that will take him throughout the Holy Land preaching and teaching until he reaches Jerusalem, where he will fulfill God’s Will in his death and resurrection. Matthew dates his story of the beginning

of Jesus' ministry not in reference to the secular calendar but in relation to significant events in salvation history. As in Mark's Gospel, Matthew reports that Jesus' ministry begins after the arrest of John the Baptist ("*Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God ...*" – Mark 1:14). The word "arrested" (*paradidomi*) means "hand over, betray, deliver up." It is the same word used repeatedly for both Judas' betrayal and for God's act of delivering Jesus up for human sins. It reflects the picture of the Suffering Servant, whom "*the Lord delivered up for our sins.*" (Isaiah 53:6). When Jesus hears of John's arrest, Matthew reports that he "*withdrew to Galilee*" (4:12). Matthew uses "withdrew" (*anachoreo*) exclusively for Jesus' response to threats ("*Now when Jesus heard this [the death of John the Baptist], he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.*" – 14:13). It is not out of cowardice, self-preservation, or strategy that Jesus withdraws, but a representation of Jesus' alternate vision of kingship, which is non-violent and non-retaliatory ("*Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.*" – 26:52).

Leaving his hometown of Nazareth, Jesus "*made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali*" (4:13). Capernaum was a busy town close to the Roman road called the Via Maris, a commercial route that connected Galilee with Syria. Jesus chooses this city, the home of Peter and Andrew, as his base of operations ("*And after getting into a boat he crossed the water and came to his own town.*" – 9:1). Matthew interprets Jesus' move to Capernaum as the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah: "*Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles – 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.*" (4:15-16, Isaiah 9:1-2). Zebulun and Naphtali were two of the sons of Jacob and two of the twelve tribes of Israel. Their tribal territories were to the west of the Sea of Galilee and by Jesus' time included the region of Galilee; Nazareth was in the territory of Zebulun, while Capernaum was in Naphtali. The painful memory of Israel's past in exile stands behind the "darkness" and "death" spoken of by the prophet. In Isaiah's time, the lands of Naphtali and Zebulun were under the domination of the Assyrian Empire who conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 733-732 BCE. The first Israelites to experience the darkness of conquest and exile will now be the first to see the light of God's goodness in the Messiah; Isaiah speaks of a grand reversal that will occur in the latter days, when the spiritual darkness of Galilee will be dispelled by the dawn of a new age when the ideal king appears. As Jesus begins his ministry in Capernaum, he proclaims "*repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*" (4:17). The imperative "repent" is based on the indicative "the kingdom of heaven has come near." "Kingdom" here refers to the active rule of

God; “has come near” refers to the eschatological kingdom that is already breaking into the world in the appearance of Jesus. In beginning his statement with the phrase “from that time on,” Matthew is indicating that this marks an important transition in his storyline and in the ministry of Jesus.

The command of Jesus in this opening statement is to “repent” (*metanoeo*), which means to “change one’s mind.” The word does not picture sorrow or remorse, but a change in direction of one’s life; it is as if Jesus was saying, “Get yourself a new orientation for the way you live, then act on it.” It is a call to get back on course, to heed the command of the prophet Joel to “*return to the LORD your God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.*” (Joel 2:13). Repentance “*urges listeners to change the direction of their lives, to adopt a new way of thinking and acting*” (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri). The nearness of the kingdom gives urgency to Jesus’ call; the new orientation that is the result of repentance is the response to the kingdom’s having “come near.”

- “God’s rule is near in that it will soon begin so people should prepare themselves. It could also mean that Jesus understood himself to be the embodiment of God’s kingdom, thus the nearness is found in proximity to Jesus. Jesus’ message is clear: God is acting in the world.” – Jillian Engelhardt.

Jesus’ first action as he begins his ministry is to call disciples to become his followers; the call of the first disciples is the beginning of the messianic community that is the church. The story of the call of these disciples is modelled on the call of Elisha by Elijah and the call of prophets in the Old Testament:

- “So he set out from there, and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was plowing. There were twelve yoke of oxen ahead of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him. He left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, ‘Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.’ Then Elijah said to him, ‘Go back again; for what have I done to you?’ He returned from following him, took the yoke of oxen, and slaughtered them; using the equipment from the oxen, he boiled their flesh and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out and followed Elijah, and became his servant.” – 1 Kings 19:19-21.
- “Then Amos answered Amaziah, ‘I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son, but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, “Go, prophesy to my people

Israel.”” – Amos 7:14-15.

As the Lord uprooted prophets from their ordinary existence, so also Jesus represents the divine initiative in calling persons to discipleship.

Jesus' calling disciples was in stark contrast to the practice of disciples who followed rabbis in his time. Rabbis did not seek out students but were sought out by applicants. Here, all the initiative is with Jesus:

- “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 sea – for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’” – 4:18-19.

Jesus comes to Simon and Andrew; they do not come to him. Jesus' call is both a command and a promise for them to become disciples. “Fish for people” is the call to participate in Jesus' divine mission for humanity.

Without a word, the brothers leave their nets and followed Jesus. This happens again when Jesus comes upon another set of brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee; when Jesus calls them, “*immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him*” (4:22). Many have identified this as Jesus' first miracle; the miracle of his powerful word that creates following, which makes disciples: “*the messianic community, the church, comes into being in response to Christ's own word.*” (Eugene Boring).

While the call of Jesus results in these two sets of fishermen brothers leaving everything behind to follow Jesus, all would-be disciples have a choice as to whether they will accept Jesus' invitation to discipleship. This invitation was not always accepted by those who received it; later in Matthew, Jesus invites a rich man to follow him, instructing him to “*go, sell your possessions, and give your money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.*” (19:21). But when this man hears Jesus' words, he does not follow the example of the fishermen on the shores of the Sea of Galilee; instead, “*when the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.*” (19:22). The brothers who left their nets on the shore to follow Jesus were choosing not only to follow Jesus but to turn their backs on the Roman Empire, with whom they had purchased a lease or contract that allowed them to fish on the sea of Galilee. They chose to turn their backs on the earthly kingdom embodied by the Roman Empire to follow the one who came to proclaim the coming of the divine kingdom, the Kingdom of Heaven.

- “By choosing Jesus, the brothers choose God’s rule over Rome. They choose to ‘fish’ their land and the people in it for God’s purposes rather than exploiting it for Rome’s gain. They choose to join Jesus’ ministry in the promised land rather than to align themselves with the interests of their occupiers. Rome wanted the men to catch fish to advance their imperialist expansion. Jesus wants them to catch people for God’s rule, which as Jesus will demonstrate throughout the rest of the Gospel, is a rule of mercy and justice and plenty.” – Engelhardt.

Jesus leaves the shores of the Sea of Galilee in the company of these new disciples who have chosen to follow him, and he “*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.*” (4:23). Teaching and preaching are closely associated in Matthew (“*Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities.*” – 11:1). Healing places were Jesus’ instruction in the context of his own previous acts of announcing the kingdom and acting in mercy to illustrate its power and its nature. The people are healed without meeting any requirements or making any confession of faith; Jesus’ healing ministry “*is entirely the initiative and grace of the messianic representative of God’s kingdom.*” (Boring). Jesus’ healing ministry fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah that looks to the day when “*the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy*” (Isaiah 35:5-6).

The call to discipleship is the call of Jesus to travel in a new direction, to leave the course one’s life has followed to orient oneself to following Jesus in the path he will tread in obedience to God’s Will. As Jesus’ course took him from his home in Nazareth to travel a path that will lead him to Jerusalem and the Cross, so will the course that his disciples travel compel them to leave behind all that they have known so that they might follow the one who calls them on the path that will ultimately lead to the empty tomb at Easter and the promise of resurrection and life. It is the call of which Jesus speaks when he says to his disciples, “*if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*” (16:24).

- “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples, who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther’s, who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world. But it is the same death every time – death in Jesus Christ, the death of the old man at his call ... The call to discipleship, the baptism in the name

of Jesus Christ means both death and life. The call of Christ, his baptism, sets the Christian in the middle of the daily arena against sin and the devil. Every day he encounters new temptations, and every day he must suffer anew for Jesus Christ's sake." – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

During both of our trips this past summer, there were numerous occasions when my GPS had to correct my route so that we could get back on course to our destination. This even happened while we were in New Jersey, a place with which I am very familiar but where there were some new roads I had not previously travelled and some others with which I have become unfamiliar after being away so many years. It was a reminder to me that the call to repentance, to get back on course from paths that have been leading me away from following our Lord, is a call that needs to be heard and obeyed on a regular basis; as the apostle has written, it is a reminder that "*you were once going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.*" (1 Peter 2:25). As our baptism into Christ Jesus calls us every day to "*rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever*" (*Small Catechism*), we are also called to repent of ways that lead us away from God so that we might get back on course to follow Jesus and walk as children of the light.

- "For in truth we are not called only once, but many times; all through our life Christ is calling us. He called us first at Baptism; but afterwards also; whether we obey his voice or not, He graciously calls us still. If we fall from our Baptism, He calls us to repent; if we are striving to fulfill our calling, He calls us from grace to grace, and from holiness to holiness, while life is given us. Abraham was called from his home, Peter from his nets, Matthew from his office, Elisha from his farm, Nathanael from his retreat; we are all in course of calling, on and on, from one thing to another, having no resting place, but mounting towards our eternal rest, and obeying one command only to have another put upon us." – John Henry Newman.

As a traveller, I have come to rely on my GPS to lead me to my destination and to get me back on course when I take a wrong turn or stray from my intended path. While the GPS is reliable, it is far from perfect; but the voice of our Lord that calls us to repent, to turn away from paths that lead us away from God to return to the "shepherd and guardian of our souls" is the perfect voice of our Lord whose words are the "*words of eternal life*" (John 6:68), the Word of God that is trustworthy and true, the voice of our Good Shepherd who will "*lead me in path of righteousness for his name's sake*" (Psalm 23). May we continue to be faithful in answering our Lord's call to discipleship, and may we heed his voice to keep us on course so that we might

be the messianic community that continues to spread his message and “*proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*” (1 Peter 2:9). May we continue to follow the voice of our Lord who will keep us on course throughout our life here on earth and unto everlasting life.

Amen.