

Sermon for Epiphany 3 Year A

January 25, 2026

(Matthew 4:12-23)

Last week we heard about the calling of the disciples from the point of view of the gospel of John. This week, we are seeing the same event through the lens of the gospel Matthew, and I will also include to scenes from the gospel of Luke.

When we look at a Bible narrative, like the calling of the disciples, to determine its meaning, it is helpful to start by looking at a few things: the setting, what happened before this event, who is doing most of the talking, what happens at the end. Then we note any other observations.

The setting is the sea of Galilee.

Right before, Jesus was in a deserted place near Capernaum. He had just endured and overcame the temptations in the desert by the devil, in preparation for his ministry. He is thrown right into the work.

Because he finds out that John the Baptist has been handed over to prison for execution, Jesus decides to take up his mission in Galilee. He likely wanted to move to a safer place after what just happened to John. We also hear echoed in today's gospel Isaiah's passage, confirming this new beginning for Jesus was prophesied, "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light." This "people" refer to both the Israelites in Isaiah's and Jesus time, and the Gentiles in the present time.

It is interesting that in Matthew this light and darkness motif initiates Jesus' mission. This is an important theme, that the arrival of God's kingdom is central to Jesus' mission and, along with the resurrection, the basis and object of Christian hope. **1**

Jesus begins to preach with the words we usually associate with John the Baptist, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near!" By calling for repentance in John's exact words, Jesus was not only taking on this role of drawing people inward to reflection and change of heart, and so choosing to follow Him, in a way he was also honoring his beloved cousin John.

One senses that between being empowered by the 40 days in the desert, while no doubt still grieving the loss of his cousin, whom he loved and who had a profound influence on Jesus' initial acceptance at the beginning of his mission, this is a turning point for Jesus. This is a sign that it is time for him to proclaim the good news independently from John. And as he will later tell the twelve disciples, Jesus had to put his hands to the plow and not look back. (i.e., He had to put aside his exhaustion and grief and begin the work he was called to do. (Luke 9:62)

Soon enough, he is seeking out his disciples, and beginning to tell parables, healing and performing miracles.

I have a wonderful book called the synoptic Gospel Parallels, **2** which provides a convenient way to show how or if at all Mark, Matthew and Luke tell the same stories. In the Luke version of the calling of the disciples, there is more detail than in the other two gospels. Jesus addresses Peter first. He probably used Peter's boat to allow for some space from the pressing crowds, and the water was a natural way to carry the sound of his voice better. The dialogue is between Jesus and Peter, and we know the familiar message at the end – that Peter, Andrew, James and John drop everything and follow Jesus to become fishers of people.

Now let's look a little deeper and see what we can learn from the added feature of an amazing catch of fish in Luke.

At the Lake of Galilee Jesus taught the people from Peter's boat. Afterwards He said to Simon: "Put out into the deep, and let down your nets for a catch. And Simon answered, 'Master, we have toiled all the night and took nothing!'" (Luke 5:4b-5a). Peter, who had years of experience with fishing, faced a dilemma. A carpenter gave an experienced fisherman a command that is totally at odds with his professional experience.

As a fisherman, Peter knew that during the night there was a much greater chance of a good catch. If one did not catch anything during the night, the chances of a good catch the next morning were even smaller. Moreover, Peter was probably dead tired after a night of fruitless work. On the other hand, he

admired Jesus; he had already likely heard about some of Jesus' teachings and witnessed some of his healings.

So since Peter was full of respect for Jesus, he responded, against what he considered his better judgment: "Yet *if you say so* I will let down the nets." (Luke 5:5b). And as you know, there was a miraculous catch of fish.

The point is, by going against his normal way of thinking, Peter acted in faith. He put aside any excuses that came to mind. By following Jesus' instructions, ***Peter is the one who acted supernaturally!*** He disregarded his own ego and refrained from doing **only** what he could understand. I think we all know how hard that is!

So what do we mean by putting aside "ego"? I think this means that at times we have a tendency to "get in our own way"

The most common if not totally obvious way we tend "to get in our own way" is by being harder on ourselves, and others, than God is on us.

God knows what challenges we all face, God understands our weaknesses and our strengths, and God does not expect us to be perfect, but to strive for perfection. God wants us to walk in the light of God's love, to know we are beloved, regardless of whatever failings we perceive we have or do have, and to know that while we are being perfected, while we are trying our best to follow the Way, that we remain open. Open to the power of God's amazing grace and love.

If we function from that place of feeling beloved, then we can be empowered to serve in ways we never imagined.

Think of the disciples, who had no experience beyond fishing when Jesus called them to abide with Him; to learn on the job so to speak. What courage they had, to start a new path which would ultimately be life-changing for them and those whose lives they touched with the message of God's restorative love. Certainly, if they could do it, so can we.

So Peter shows us the content of an act of faith. An act of faith is an act which exceeds and transcends human expectations.

Luke tells us how such acts of faith are richly rewarded. When Peter let down his guard, and let down the nets, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. (Luke 5:6-7). This made a deep impression on the two sets of brothers, and they all joined Jesus as disciples. And in our gospel today we hear the famous saying, “Follow me and you will become fishers of people”. In the promise of this abundant catch is the fact that Jesus, the Word, will become spiritual nourishment for generations to come through the ongoing work of discipleship.

Finally, we need to remember that the people who Jesus was addressing were people who lived under oppressive Roman rule and wanted social justice.

The people were waiting for God’s intervention. Meanwhile, God was then and is now waiting for people’s collaboration.

Jesus did not say the kingdom of heaven would be here soon – he said it was **here already**. And the heart of Christianity is that it is a **Participatory Kingdom**. **Participating with God.**

I think that we need to see St. John’s as a *center of hope* for those who are already here; to see it as a center of hope for those who have not yet appeared, is an act of faith. I also think we can trust that everything we have done, we are doing and we will do as a congregation to make this happen will result in growth in many ways here at St. John’s. Let us trust God and one another, and look for ways to collaborate to manifest God’s kingdom here in new ways.

Can you think of anything going on in your life that is encouraging you to make an act of faith? Are you able to put aside any excuses, or let’s even call them rational objections, to something the Lord is urging you to do for God’s kingdom? Also, who or what is navigating your boat? Because if it isn’t Jesus, you might be missing the invitations to those acts of faith altogether. Let’s put whatever is holding us back aside. We will **always** be more effective if Jesus is the driving force.

The *Calling of the Disciples and Miraculous Catch of Fish* in Matthew and Luke are about collaboration and participation with God to make the Kingdom manifest in the here and now through acts of justice and through our particular, innate and perhaps, latent gifts. Like Peter, sometimes we really need to step out of our **norms** and just follow the impulse of God's love.

So the catch of fish is already manifesting itself...as we each take time to reflect on where we are called to take an act of faith that will grow the church. Let's put our hands to the plow, and start furrowing the good soil here in Tappahannock.

Resources

1. Brown, Raymond et. al., editors; The New Jerome Biblical Commentary; Prentice Hall International; 1969. 1990; p. 639
2. Throckmorton, jr., Burton; Gospel Parallels: a Comparison of the Synoptic Gospels; Thomas Nelson Publishers; Nashville, Tennessee; 1992; p. 20

Other ideas to include in discussion

“Trust is the first step to love.”

Munshi Premchand, a famous Hindu poet from early 20th India

*When for a second I am the soul he loves
I shatter the worlds.
Unlovable, hard, in misery,
I tear myself from earth like a tree.*

- Jalal-ud-Din Rumi