

3 Epiphany Year A 2020
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC
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Isaiah 9:1-4 Psalm 27:1, 5-13 1 Corinthians 1:10-18 Matthew 4:12-23

In calling his disciples, Jesus says “I will make you fishers of people.” I have wondered about that phrase, and in my search, ended up in the book of Jeremiah, which reveals some background and specific meaning for the phrase. Here it is:

The sixteenth chapter of Jeremiah depicts a time of great disaster.

‘[There is disaster] because your ancestors have forsaken me,’ declares the LORD, ‘and followed other gods and served and worshiped them. They have forsaken me and did not keep my law.’¹² But you have behaved more wickedly than your ancestors! See how all of you are following the stubbornness of your evil hearts instead of obeying me.¹³ So I will throw you out of this land into a land neither you nor your ancestors have known, and there you will serve other gods day and night, for I will show you no favor.’

In ancient times, it was thought that illness and other calamities were caused by some sin of oneself or one’s ancestors. For a people who were in exile, scattered far away from their homeland, this explains their plight.

¹⁴ “However, the days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when it will no longer be said, ‘As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt,’ ¹⁵ but it will be said, ‘As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the Israelites up out of the land of the north and out of all the countries where he had banished them.’ For I will restore them to the land I gave their ancestors.

In other words, God will redeem Israel, bringing its people back together, and bringing them home. First, however, [God will send] for many fishermen,” declares the LORD, “and they will catch them. “Them” refers to the people who are not following the Lord. God will send fishermen and hunters and find those who are not following the Lord; in Jeremiah, God will “doubly repay their iniquity and sin.”

God, then, will bring the Israelites to the Promised Land, and when they live entirely contrary to God’s will, God will inflict wrath upon them. That sounds to our ears like a typical Old Testament viewpoint. The people of Matthew’s time would be familiar with this story and with its premise: that God will diligently search for those who do not know or follow God.

From that context, think about Jesus saying “I will make you fish for people.” Do you suppose that God, through Jesus, is searching for everyone who does not know

our Lord? This is Jesus, God-with-us, who John has proclaimed to be the Savior of Israel, bringing to the people land and life, purging them from their sins. If people are being baptized, cleansing themselves and their pasts, then they will find favor with God ... establishing a life in the way God would have it. Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry often mentions God's way of living; it is the way of love; he says:

"Yes, the way of God's love turns our world **upside down**. But that's really **right-side up**," "and in that way, the nightmare of this world will be transfigured into the very dream of God for humanity and all creation.

Here is great hope! The nightmare of the Israelites, scattered across many lands, will not last forever; the way of God, the way of love, will one day rule. Jesus will bring about this change by fishing for people, not in order to inflict wrath, but to show them the way of love.

My mind has an “aha!” moment with this background – so **that’s** why these brothers are called to follow Jesus and continue their vocation of fishing. When Jesus is at the center of our lives, our lives are changed... turned upside down ...from wherever we are. Jesus comes across the brothers who make their living fishing; they have the right tools, resolve, expertise and strength. Jesus says, in effect, “let me show you how to use your gifts in a new way.” What great news for you and I! When we say a believing “yes” to a relationship with Jesus, we will be

empowered to use **our** gifts in a new way: the way of love, God's way. God calls us as disciples right where we are, doing what we usually do, and transforms our gifts for God's purposes.

We also have the context that John the baptizer is in prison: Jesus takes up his call of "Repent!" We have the word "repent" many times; we say a confession almost every week in worship. We ask God to forgive the ways that we have strayed away from God. We promise to turn again toward Jesus. Repentance plays a huge role in bringing about a redeemed world.

Repent, *metanoia* in Greek, is about changing our minds, not in a simple way, but in the sense of changing the basic way we look at the world and carry ourselves in it. John, and now Jesus, announce that, with repenting our sins, a basic change is beginning in the world. Jesus is inviting us to be part of that change. "Follow me. We'll fish for people." In following Jesus, "God-with-us," God is at the center of our lives. God, through Jesus, seeks us out, offering to his beloved children a way, a life, of love.

We – you – are first, children of God. God values and honors and loves you. We live as God's children always, and we do all kinds of things in response to God's call. "All kinds of things" might happen through work, or volunteering, fishing,

and most often through our relationships. God continues to have us call others into into relationship with us and with God. “Repent: think in an overall new way. Follow me... into God’s way of life.” That is our call and our promise from God – new life – since the gathering of these first disciples. And we have been wrapped in God’s love, are God’s beloved children, since creation. The psalmist writes that God has known us since we were knit together in our mother’s womb. We are, above all and first, children of God. We turn back, and turn to, God’s plans for God’s children, which is abundant, peaceful, life.

As we walk together in this congregation, we live out our Christian call by being the gathering of God’s beloved children. We are to be places of welcome and acceptance. Keep praying, friends, and living and being, as you are in fact doing, bringing others into the arms of our loving God, into the way of love.