



## **Method: Our Wesleyan Way Worship Series**

Sermon Title: "The Way to the Kingdom"

Matthew 4:12-23—26 January 2014

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Hear the day's lesson:

12 Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. 13 He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, 14 so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 15 "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— 16 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." 17 From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

18 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. 19 And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." 20 Immediately they left their nets and followed him. 21 As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. 22 Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. 23 Jesus 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 (Matthew 4:12-23).

If we look at the part of our lesson where Jesus walks by the Sea of Galilee, then we know that Jesus is calling to himself an alternative community. This is a community that will reflect the coming reign of God, what Matthew regularly calls the "Kingdom of Heaven." Prior to this story John baptized Jesus and Jesus was "led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted" (Matthew 4:1). After this temptation experience, Jesus began his ministry by "proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near'" (Matthew 4:17).

Then, Jesus saw two people fishing, brothers it turns out. Jesus said: "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people" (Matthew 4:19). And we might say that they impulsively followed him. Perhaps they had heard about Jesus, but we would have to admit that what they did was quite spontaneous. The Bible



records no time of meditation or prayer concerning the decision. Matthew simply tells us “Immediately they left their nets and followed him.” Later, Peter tells Jesus, “Look, we have left everything and followed you” (Matthew 19:27). For once Simon Peter had it exactly right!

A little later we see the same occurrence repeated. Jesus sees two other brothers, “James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets and he called them.” And believe it or not, the same result follows. The sons of Zebedee, as did Simon Peter and Andrew, follow Jesus. “Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.” Old Zebedee could not have been too pleased that his best workers deserted him and his boat to follow an itinerant preacher, Jesus. Somehow, Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John must have sensed Jesus’ later promise: “Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life” (Matthew 19:29).

Plainly, these disciples made an impulsive decision. Perhaps this impulsive act is difficult for us to understand today. But these four disciples, as before them their parents and grandparents had for generations all been fisher-folk. They, no doubt, expected that their children and children’s children would be fisher-folk, too. Same old thing—life looked endlessly predictable. But then—ALONG CAME JESUS—and all this likelihood Jesus transformed when he summoned: “Follow me.”

If these disciples had taken the safe, non-impulsive course of action, we would have forgotten them within a generation. Yet, here we are two millennia later, still talking about them, and in our best moments, imitating them.



Preachers in particular, and the church in general, advises Christians to prayerfully consider their courses of action. Meditate about what you are to do—pray about it. We encourage patience and waiting before we make major life changes. We say things like: “Here is some good counsel: Do not try to make major lifestyle changes all at once. Start small—take baby steps—tackle one thing at a time.”

But today I recommend that we throw all that out the window. Be bold. Consider inserting a prayer into your daily life, perhaps more than once. Consider, offering yourself to some of our excellent local missions—even and especially our “One Mile Missions.” Consider being a tutor for the HOPE Tutoring Center or becoming a Big Hope Mentor. Consider actually giving of your substance to the church’s work. In other words, consider being a little impulsive on the confession of faith that you once made and try to live out of that commitment.

What if John Wesley had not impulsively decided to attend a church meeting on Aldersgate Street in London in 1738? What if Martin Luther had decided to be more cautious and not nailed his “95 Theses” to the church door in Wittenberg? What if Dietrich Bonhoeffer had not decided to defy the Nazis in Germany in the early 1940s?

When you are trying to decide whether to be bold or not, concerning your faith in Jesus Christ, simply remember Jesus’ promise to his disciples: “Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life” (Matthew 19:29).

Even now, Jesus offers us a place in the Kingdom of Heaven. A



prominent theme in Matthew's Gospel is the coming of the kingdom. When Matthew writes of the kingdom he writes of the Kingdom of Heaven, whereas, Mark and Luke use the term Kingdom of God more generally. When John writes of the concept he calls it "eternal life." Two examples will suffice: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). A second: "This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day" (John 6:40).

After John the Baptizer's arrest, Jesus proclaims that the kingdom of heaven is drawing near, a message of good news. Many Christians have difficulty understanding the "kingdom of heaven" references in Matthew. Their misunderstandings may shape the way they respond to the call embodied within Matthew. Jesus' references here and throughout Matthew, as Anglican bishop/Bible scholar N. T. Wright notes, are not teachings about how to go to heaven. They are not about "our escape from this world into another one, but to God's sovereign rule coming 'on earth as it is in heaven.'" This fact reminds us that Jesus' call to discipleship is not to some future salvation, but rather to contemporary action, to fish for human beings—now and today. Perhaps we might even think of the "Kingdom of Heaven" as a state of being or something like "a condition into which we have been invited." In other words, "Kingdom of Heaven" is not a place as much as circumstance.

The Kingdom of Heaven is not so much a location as it is what we are and with whom we exist. When we are the timeless abode of God in Christ, then "Heaven" is perhaps within or among us (Luke 17:21). As soon as God has formed the notion of Heaven in us, we then become genuine disciples. We are



those who follow Jesus who was “teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.”

Some people’s idea of discipleship is to hang around merely waiting to die and then to enter the Kingdom. But for an exciting life of Discipleship NOW, we can become impulsive and follow Jesus into the Kingdom of Heaven that exists in the here and now—the Kingdom that is within us and among us!

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