

“Words to Live By”

January 26, 2020

Star Words: A Spiritual Practice for Epiphany (and Beyond) Series

When I was growing up, one of my favorite types of books was called “Choose Your Own Adventure.” The idea behind it was that the story began, and there were points along the way when you had to make a choice about the next part of the story. If you chose one plot, the book directed you to a certain page. If you chose another, the book directed you to a different page. And the stops and starts continued throughout the book. One choice might make the story shorter, another longer. Each choice affected the plotline, but you, the reader, had control of the story. The excitement was in seeing what came next and how many different ways the story could go.

When Jesus called these fishermen to follow, I wonder what went through their minds. Did they realize what they were in for? Did they realize what it meant to follow this Jesus? Did they know right then that he was the One they’d been waiting for? Did they understand what life would be like – and did they know what would happen in the end? The answer to all of these questions is probably a strong “no.” How could they have gone so willingly if they knew all that was ahead for him and for them? Any one of us would have some reservations, so I always wonder if we’re missing some dialogue here.

Last week, we read from the Gospel of John - the calling of the first disciples and how John the Baptist and Andrew were bringers – those who led others to Jesus. Today we hear Matthew’s version. And this encounter reminds us of the crux of being a Christian. It’s about making a decision to follow Jesus Christ.

Our focus during Epiphany is how Jesus comes for the whole world. When Jesus walked the earth, his ministry touched both Jews and Gentiles. And still for us today, the message of Epiphany is that Jesus is the Light to the whole world, Savior of every nation, Friend to every person who walks the earth with us. So will we follow him?

Gospel writer Matthew quotes the prophet Isaiah, which we usually hear around Christmastime: “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned.” Go back to the 730s BC. Two regions, Zebulun and Naphtali, have already fallen into the hands of the Assyrians, and now Judah is under the same threat. Consider what it might have been like for them: anguish, despair, hopelessness for anything to get better, living with the constant reminder of what’s been lost and grieving over those losses, fear of what’s coming in the future.

It’s into this atmosphere that the prophet speaks hope! First, Zebulun and Naphtali will be honored. These two areas are the region of Galilee, and the promise that God speaks through Isaiah will come to pass. Galilee is where Jesus begins his public ministry. God will overturn their oppression and bring victory.

So the fact that Jesus makes his home in Galilee is important – it’s mostly Gentile territory. He continues with John’s message of repentance and the coming of God’s Kingdom. And the way that Jesus calls disciples reinforces that he is for all people. Jesus approaches Peter, Andrew, James, and John after John the Baptist is arrested. Certainly these men have heard about John’s arrest, so it’s amazing that they respond at all! Would we go so willing into such a tenuous and uncertain future?

Jesus makes the first move. He sees them and speaks to them. Most importantly, he comes to them as they are doing their daily work – probably cleaning their nets to prepare for another day fishing on the Sea of Galilee - and probably mending their nets because a big catch did some damage! So these are successful fishermen!

Thinking about these fishermen brings back vivid memories for me. We’ve traveled a few times to Croatia, which borders the Adriatic Sea. The city of Zadar, where Ivan’s grandmother lived, is right on the Adriatic, and so when we’d go into the main area of the city, we passed lots of fishing boats. Even more vivid is the memory of the smell from the fish market where the fresh fish came in everyday.

But that memory reminded me of the importance of fishing. In many coastal areas, fishing is vital to the economy. And in Galilee, fishing was vital to the economy. Fish were dried and sold and imported throughout the Mediterranean world. Many people were employed in fishing – either as day laboring fishermen or partners in a fishing business.

And for those who actually did the fishing, like these men whom Jesus approached, fishing was physically demanding. Archeologists have found ancient fishing boats. One example was about 27 ft. long, 8 ft. wide and 5 ft. deep. They figure this boat could hold a ton – either 5 crewmembers and big catch of fish or 5 crewmembers and some other crew. Fishermen probably used a dragnet around 100 ft. long or a circular net roughly 25 ft. in diameter – and maybe even hook and line to catch fish.

And in addition to being a tough and dirty job, fishing could be dangerous. Storms could come in quickly on the Sea of Galilee. And I thought about one other important requirement for fishing – patience. To watch and wait, to find the right place for a good catch – patience was necessary and a good trait for those who would help Jesus.

If we follow Jesus, it means a life of doing. And it seems that these fishermen were used to hard work. Fishing meant working hard every day to bring in the catch. But let’s be clear: these men weren’t qualified because of what they did, how they were raised, who their family was, how much money they had. They were qualified because they were willing to follow Jesus when he called them!

So being a disciple of Jesus means making a decision to follow him. I still have questions: Why did these fishermen respond to Jesus’ invitation? Were they bored with fishing? Did they want to interact with people instead? And why did Jesus ask them to leave their families? How did Zebedee feel when his sons – who were vital to the family business – up and left him?

I can't get the answers for everything I want to know. But we see these men make a decision to follow Jesus when he calls. Jesus has the ability to bring people together around him – not coercively, but willingly, to serve. Jesus is not pushy. And yet, Jesus is direct when it comes to these followers. He calls us to respond to God – not to strike fear in our hearts or coerce us. Jesus' disciples, then and now learn from him and continue his work.

The decision to follow Jesus means that we need to focus on Jesus. And let's be clear: Jesus didn't say "follow your pastor" or "follow this good idea that I have" or "follow this group of people." Jesus says, "Follow me." He interrupts these men in the middle of their work and commands them to follow, but also promises them, "I will make you fish for people."

Right away, Jesus promises to equip these fishermen with what they need to follow him. Perhaps it's a way to set their minds at ease, and don't we all need that? If we're honest, the thought of following Jesus is daunting, especially the part about fishing for people! But we have to trust that God knows what God is doing and that we'll have what we need for the task.

We have to trust Jesus to take our everyday, ordinary life and use it for God's purposes. That might mean that your job becomes a place where you witness about the power of God in your life so that someone else takes the step to know more about God. Maybe your connections with others take on a new dimension – you tell them about what Jesus means to you. You invite a friend or neighbor to church. Friends, it's possible that God changes a life because of your life! It happens every day, and none of us would be here if it didn't! We're here because someone decided to follow Jesus.

And being a disciple means making a decision to follow Jesus. And when we follow, he will equip us with what we need to fish for people. He will open our mouths with words that help and heal others. He will use our hands in service to others so that they feel the love of Christ. He will use our faces to smile and set people at ease. He will use our arms to embrace people and give comfort. He will send us walking into places where we encounter people who need to hear God's Good News and help us to see where he's already present in ways we never expected!

And this decision to follow Jesus means that life will change for us. It's not the kind of following we're used to today. It's not from a distance like on social media where we're connected, but not really involved. We can "follow" and not be invested, but when we follow Jesus, we move closer to him. We're not at arm's length, but totally embraced in a lifelong journey.

And it's not just about proximity. It's about everything. We change. How we view our lives will be different because we'll see ourselves in light of God's call. Our priorities and sense of community will be different because our focus isn't on ourselves and our desires, but on the needs around us. These fishermen went with Jesus into the lives of the poor, sick, and those who were cast out of society. Author A.J. Jacobs set out to "live

biblically” for a year, and his experience of following Scripture changed his life completely – in big and small ways.

So maybe we need to ask ourselves, “What is different about me because I follow Jesus?” Is it my speech, my priorities, my spending, my free time? What has it cost me? I don’t mean financially, but what is the cost of discipleship? What have you given up? What nets have you dropped - or what do you need to let go of? What have you taken on because you follow Jesus?

United Methodist Bishop Will Willimon says, “You don’t take Jesus anywhere – he takes you places. You can’t ‘give your life to Christ.’ He takes it! If you’re in any sort of ministry, it’s because you got put there. God reached in, grabbed you, called, summoned you, commanding ‘Follow me.’ And you did. Thanks be to God!”

Jesus calls these fishermen in the middle of their work. He interrupts their lives and disrupts their routines. Perhaps we need to consider that, too – have we let Jesus disrupt our lives and change our priorities? How it is to follow him into the work of liberation and love?

Just like those “Choose Your Own Adventure” books, making a decision to follow Jesus is an adventure. Following Jesus means that we give up some control and allow him to direct our paths. When we follow Jesus, we become people who pray in a world where many people don’t have hope in prayer. We work for justice in a world where injustice stares us in the face every day – where people have nothing while others have more than enough. We make peace in a world where the easier – or at least more common - road is to make violence. We seek truth in a time when it seems so elusive and sometimes even relative.

Last week, all of us received an invitation that included an RSVP - a place for us to respond to Jesus’ invitation to “come and see.” I invite us to consider Jesus’ words to the fishermen - “Follow me.” Notice he doesn’t say “believe in me” or “understand the mystery of God.” He says, “Follow me.” It’s a call to come closer and be in community with him - to do what he does and participate in his saving work in the world in bringing the Kingdom of God.

Maybe you don’t fish, but whatever our daily work is, Jesus can use us to connect with others in his name. Jesus came for all people, and it’s a daily decision to follow him - sometimes into unknown and unfamiliar places. That’s where we stand today – the Light of the world is real and in our midst, calling us to follow and we have to make a decision. Jesus offers each words to live by: “Follow me.” Jesus calls you to be a disciple. Will you go?

Thanks be to God. AMEN.