

# Sermon for Sunday, January 26, 2020 - “Drawn Into God’s Net”

Third Sunday after Epiphany  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Decorah, Iowa  
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

This story raises so many questions.

How could Simon, Andrew, James and John just abandon their work and their families to follow Jesus?

How could they do it so suddenly - so immediately?

Does Jesus expect that of us?

Is it even right for Jesus to ask James and John to just leave their father there in the boat?

What if their dad needed their help with the family business and their care as he aged?

I’ve often heard that this text means Simon, Andrew, James and John displayed wonderful, radical obedience and we should do the same. Except, I’m not really sure I want to follow someone who expects people to immediately abandon everything and everyone to follow him.

Yet there’s more than meets the eye in this story.

These four men were trapped in some pretty oppressive conditions. Jesus’ call was great news for them, a wonderful invitation into freedom and new life for them and their whole community.

Simon, Andrew, James and John lived and worked under Roman occupation. The Roman emperor decreed that all the fish in the Sea of Galilee belonged to him and Rome controlled all fishing on the sea through taxes and permits. Fishermen could only sell fish through authorized dealers and taxes were as high as 40%.<sup>1</sup> So, the fishermen couldn’t even afford to buy and eat the fish they caught. Most of the fish was eaten by the elites. Common people ate very little of it - usually just an ounce and a half each week and most of that was in the form of a paste made from fish parts.<sup>2</sup> It sounds worse than bologna!

These four men weren’t part of lucrative family fishing businesses. They were more like fish caught up in Rome’s traps. They probably worried a lot about how they could care for their fathers and their families, how they could survive under Roman occupation.

Then Jesus came on the scene. He was baptized, complete with a voice from heaven declaring he was God’s Son. He started traveling around proclaiming, “Repent for the Kingdom of heaven has come near!” That can sound like fairly abstract, churchy language to us. But to people living under Roman occupation it was very concrete good news - good news that had a direct impact on their daily life. In saying, “The Kingdom of heaven has come near,” Jesus was saying there is another power on the scene, a kingdom greater than any power on earth, even Rome. God has come near to set people free from all traps, from oppression and suffering and the death-dealing ways of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Malina, Bruce. *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003, pg. .363.

<sup>2</sup> Karris, Robert. *Eating Your Way Through the Gospel of Luke*. Collegeville: Order of St. Benedict, 2006, pg. 7.

Rome may act like all the fish and all the people belong to it, but God has come to fish for people. God has come to draw people out of waters controlled by Rome, out of waters of oppression and death, to draw all people into God's mercy and justice, into God's kingdom.

Turn toward this, look up and see, Jesus said as he called people to repent. That's what repent means - to turn toward something, to see differently, to change your mind. Don't fixate on the traps. Don't let hardship shape your sense of what is possible; don't let all that is wrong define you. Turn and see, God is here to set you free.

This was very real good news for these fishermen and their families.

And then, Jesus called these hardscrabble fishermen to join what he was doing. He said they could be part of the net that he would use to fish for people, to draw people into God. They could be part of God's community of mercy and justice and participate in setting people free.

Jesus was inviting Andrew, Simon, James and John into new life that would bring freedom for them and their loved ones. No wonder they said yes, and so quickly!

There is so much today that traps us in weariness and despair - so much that makes us worried and fearful that leads to oppression and violence, so many ways that we harm others. Our sense of the world and ourselves is so often defined by all that is wrong and hard.

Yet there is another power on the scene, a power greater than any on earth - God's kingdom of mercy and justice has come near. There is hope for change and new life for us and all creation. God is at work to get us all out of traps, out of waters of oppression and death, and into communion with God and one another.

It can be hard to see this. So God comes to us in Jesus who is present here today in the word of promise, in bread and wine, in the gathered community.

Jesus is here to say the kingdom of heaven has come near for you, repent, turn, see, and take part in God's kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven.

Jesus is here to draw us into God's community of mercy and justice, to form us into the net that will draw others into God's love, into hope, into new life.

This is good news for us, for our loved ones, and for our whole world.

We can say *yes* to this and follow where Jesus leads.

We can participate in what God is doing to bring freedom and new life for all people.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.