

Sermon for Sunday, January 24, 2021 - "Freed to Follow"

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.

Simon, Andrew, James and John were trapped like fish caught up in the net of the all-powerful Roman Empire. That's a part of their story we usually miss.

When we hear the story of these first disciples, we often focus on the extraordinary, radical sacrifice they made by leaving everything to follow Jesus. That reading of their story can leave us cold. We're nothing like that, this has nothing to do with us. It can let us off the hook. They were people of extraordinary faith and we'll never measure up so why bother. It can leave us bound by guilt and shame thinking we're not good enough.

Yet really this story is just overflowing with good news for us and our world today - good news that sets us free amidst all the oppression, fear, injustice and racism that trap and bind us. So, let's dive more deeply into the story of these first disciples.

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, taxes were terribly high, and they couldn't even afford to buy and eat the fish they caught.

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 families, how they could survive under Roman occupation. They likely hoped that John the Baptist would set them free from Rome; but King Herod had John imprisoned, plunging God's people back into the depths of despair.

Then Jesus came on the scene proclaiming, "The kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." That can sound like abstract, churchy language to us. But to people living under Roman occupation, it was actually news that changed things, news that had a direct impact on their daily lives - similar to what happens when people learn "you can get the COVID vaccine now". In announcing the good news that "The Kingdom of God has come near," Jesus was saying there is another power on the scene, a kingdom greater than any power on earth, even Rome.

Rome and every power of this world may act like all the fish and all the people belong to them, but God has come to fish for people. God has come near to set people free from all traps, from oppression and suffering, and the death-dealing ways of the world. God has come 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 let your mind be bound by all that ensnares. Turn and see, God is here to set you free.

This was very real good news for these fishermen and their families. Then, Jesus called these hard-scrabble 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!

We, too, are trapped and bound in a world so dominated by the forces of sin, oppression and injustice. One of these forces is White Supremacy Culture. White Supremacy isn't just people in white hoods. It's not just the ugly racism we saw in the insurrection on this nation's Capitol. It lives in common, everyday actions as part of the milieu of this country that has been shaped by white pseudo-supremacy from the beginning.

At the most recent meeting of our Anti-racism Task Force, we began examining White Supremacy Culture using the teaching of Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun from their *Dismantling Racism Workbook*.¹ Jones and Okun identify key aspects of White Supremacy Culture including perfectionism, defensiveness, either/or thinking, paternalism, and the idea that we have a right to comfort. These thinking patterns have been employed by whites, often unconsciously, to oppress black people, indigenous peoples and people of color. Yet the harm doesn't stop there. Our task force, made up of seven white people, discussed how we see these patterns harming us, this congregation and the other institutions we love.

These patterns and powers trap and bind, press and squeeze us. They drain us, our communities and our country of life and vitality. 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 set us free from all that traps and ensnares us and to draw us into the beloved community with God and one another.

Jesus comes near again today for you, for us. Jesus speaks through scripture, sermon and song for you today saying the kingdom of God is here; repent, turn, see, and take part in God's kingdom.

Jesus comes near to form us into the net that will draw others into God's love, into hope, into new life.

Jesus comes to announce concrete good news for us, for our communities and for the world.

Like those first disciples, we can say yes to this invitation and follow where Jesus leads. We can participate in what God is doing to bring freedom and new life.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.

¹ "The Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture" from *Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups*, by Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun, ChangeWork, 2001.

<https://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/white-supremacy-culture-characteristics.html>