

“Unlikely People, Unlikely Places”
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Epiphany 3B
Matthew 4:12-22

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Because I’ve moved around a lot, I find it hard to answer the question, “where are you from?”

That’s why when I heard Taiye Selasi ask, “where are you a *local*?” I was intrigued.

Selasi has lived all over the world and struggles to identify
one particular place she is *from*.

To answer the question, “where are you a *local*,”

Selasi suggests we think about the rituals and relationships
that mean the most to us.

Where are the routines that organize your daily life?

Where do people recognize you and call you by name?¹

These are the places you are *local*.

Jesus grew up in Nazareth. It was a small, rural town

and we can assume that most of his rituals and relationships were there.

The one story we have of Jesus’s childhood gives us a glimpse
into another place he was a local.

In this story, his parents take the family to Jerusalem for a religious festival.

¹https://www.ted.com/talks/taiye_selasi_don_t_ask_where_i_m_from_ask_where_i_m_a_local/transcript?language=en

They are halfway back home before they realize Jesus isn't with them.

They find him in the temple, his father's house, as he calls it,
where he felt totally at home – at all of twelve years old –
interpreting the scriptures for his elders.

So it seems a little surprising that when it comes time for Jesus

to begin his ministry – to preach, teach, heal, and choose his followers,

Jesus does not go back to Nazareth or to Jerusalem and the temple;

instead, he goes to a far-flung town on the northern coast

of the Sea of Galilee: **Capernaum**.

We can assume that Jesus could have started his ministry anywhere he wanted,

but this was a life-changing decision for the first disciples,

for some of them, it was *a life or death decision*.

So how did Jesus decide to start in Capernaum and call four fishermen to be his first disciples?

Jesus does not go to Nazareth,

where he feels at home and where people already know him.

He does not go to Jerusalem, the religious center of Judaism,

and call those who have spent a lifetime studying the scriptures

that prophesy his coming.

Jesus goes to Capernaum, and once there, he reaches out,

not to the town's leaders,

not to the citizens who hold wealth and power,

not to the intellectuals,

but to a **few young fishermen** who have been brought up in the family business.

"Follow me," he tells them, "and I will make you fish for people."

Unlikely people from an unlikely place: this is how God makes disciples.

Years ago, Sam Wells received a visit from *a man he barely knew,*

the CEO of a prominent corporation in the city Wells served as a pastor.

Wells had met the man a few times before and noticed that he always

looked just a little disheveled, in spite of all his accomplishments.

The day he dropped by, he sat in the corner of Well's study,

chewing his fingernails and holding, rather nervously,

a home-made cassette tape. (*Remember those?*)

Wells says, "I guessed that *small talk* wasn't what my visitor had come for.

The man finally said: 'I've come to see you because *there is no one else I can tell.*

I want to be a Christian. In my world that's like saying *I'm crazy.*

Last night I got up in the early hours and made this tape

and it says what I want to say and I want to leave it with you

because *there's no one else I can give it to."*

And he handed over the tape.

For that man, handing over the tape was as momentous as Peter and Andrew

setting down their fishing nets and James and John

walking away from their father's boat –after Jesus says, simply,

“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

There is a lot of speculation about what could have made these first disciples

drop everything to follow Jesus – after all, *he hasn't done anything remarkable yet.*

Some say Jesus must have had **incredible charisma**,

that he was the kind of person you just wanted to be near.

Maybe.

Others say that these guys had been waiting for **a chance to do something**

different – they were ready to see the world,

and Jesus simply offered them the opportunity.

Maybe.

But could it be that with these few words of invitation, Jesus shows that

he knows something about these guys? He knows *who they are*

and *what they are capable of* and he has a plan to take that

and ***transform it into something spectacular,***

not just for them but for others as well:

“I will make you fish for people.”

Jesus plans to use all of the skills these fishermen have learned on the sea:

patience, discernment, observation, and respect for nature,

and Jesus will put these skills to work **transforming** the world.

This is what God does.

This is who God is.

God goes to the most *ordinary* places and finds the most *ordinary* people
and then uses the hard-earned skills we have to **transform** the world.

For some, these skills are earned in years of *education and hard work*.

For others, these skills are earned through experiences of
unimaginable *suffering and hardship*.

But, as Richard Rohr likes to say, ***God doesn't waste anything,***

not one second of our lives. **All** of your life is part of your life with God,
your salvation history and your particular journey of discipleship.

Nothing is wasted, everything – even the things you think of

as your most colossal failures or your deepest regrets –

everything is something God can and will use.

God calls every one of us, no matter how ordinary or unqualified we think we might be...

Our job is to decide how to answer God's invitation.

Tom Tewell tells the story of a wealthy corporate executive named Jack

that Tewell knew while serving as a pastor in New York City.

Jack and his wife raised three children who grew up going to worship

and Sunday School nearly *every week*. They were confirmed

in the eighth grade and went on mission trips each summer.

Their middle daughter, Anna, left New York City to attend college
in Atlanta, where she found another church to attend.

During Anna's sophomore year, a speaker came to the church to report on
his work at an orphanage in a part of Africa ravaged by civil war.

At the end of the talk the speaker said, almost in passing,
that he needed support for his ministry –
not just financial donations,
but people who to come and work with him at the orphanage,
for a week or a month or a year at a time.

Anna called her parents after the talk.

She was talking a mile a minute trying to explain to them how
amazing this ministry was and how *she wanted to get involved*.

They listened appreciatively, yes, that sounded wonderful, sure,
we'll make a donation. And they did make a donation, a sizable one.

But a few days later, Anna called back and she was still on fire
about what she'd heard. "Mom, Dad," she said,

"I think I need to go to Africa."

"It sounds dangerous," they said. "Can't we just make another donation?"

But Anna was determined to go. She had to be there, to see it for herself,
to learn from the people, and to serve the children of this orphanage.

"Okay, fine," they finally relented, "why don't you make arrangements
to go this summer for a week or two."

“No,” she said. “I don’t want to just go and dip my toe in.

I want to be a part of this work. ***This is what God is calling me to do.***

As soon as the spring semester is over, I want to go for a year. At least.”

It took a while for Jack and his wife to come around to the idea,

but as much as they worried about her physical safety,

they could not help but be moved by her sense of call.

Finally, they stopped trying to convince Anne to stay put

and instead helped make arrangements for her to go.

Still, they secretly hoped she might change her mind.

Of course, she didn’t, and in June, they put her on a plane.

When Jack told the story later to his pastor, he had tears in his eyes.

“I can’t believe she’s doing this,” he kept saying.

“You know, we raised our daughter to be **a respectable Christian.**

*We didn’t actually want her to be **a real one.**”*

When it came time for Jesus to start his ministry,

he made a decision that shaped the rest of his life:

where he would go and whom he would invite to join him.

The first disciples had a decision to make too:

would they turn from what was safe and familiar and

venture into the unknown with Jesus?

Not just once and not just today, but over and over again, every single day,

God invites us to make the same decision. To follow Jesus requires us to

hold lightly all the things we know, the comforts of our relationships

and our knowledge and our stuff,

and open ourselves to being transformed

and to join the work of transforming the world.

I know that I am not the only one who feels heartbroken and angry and overwhelmed
by the suffering and division all around us.

By the escalating tensions between the United States and Iran.

By the ugliness and intractability of the racial divide in our country.

By the fear felt by millions of immigrants who don't know

whether they will ever again have a place to call home.

I'm sure each of you has your own list of the situations both local and global
which get under your skin and into your heart.

Well, God gives us a choice of what we do with our despair and anger.

We can stay where we are local: in the safe confines of our Nazareth,

where our history and our relationships help us know our place;

Or we can go to our Jerusalem, our religious center,

where the rituals of our faith comfort us.

But before we settle into either of those places where we are local, remember:

Jesus calls us to Capernaum, the place we haven't been before,

so that, once there, we can ***see our faith and ourselves anew.***

Jesus knows how hard all this is, how broken we are, how broken our world is.

His choice to go to Capernaum reminds us that this work of bringing God's kingdom,

God's ways to this earth, starts with an invitation

away from all that we know.

God needs us, all of our hard-earned skills and knowledge,

so that God's love and God's invitation to do this gospel work

can reach *every broken and breaking place in the world.*

After that CEO left Sam Wells' study, Wells found himself with the cassette in his hand.

He put it in a tape player and pressed play.

He heard the sound of the CEO clearing his throat

and then a *long silence.*

Then he cleared his throat again and, to Wells' astonishment,

this proud, accomplished man

began to sing a simple song:

"I have decided to follow Jesus.

I have decided to follow Jesus.

I have decided to follow Jesus.

No turning back. No turning back.”²

Amen.

—Amy Starr Redwine © 2020

² I am indebted to Mark Ramsey’s sermon, “Cloaked,” preached at Westlake Hills Presbyterian Church, June 12, 2016.