

Look At These Fools
A Sermon for Every Sunday
Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A
Matthew 4:12-23

When I first started teaching and preaching at churches in Manhattan, I will admit to being a little bit unnerved at driving in New York City traffic. Working in Princeton at the time, I found it easier, especially on Sunday mornings, to drive into the city. They say that New York is the city that never sleeps. That is accurate, except on Sunday mornings. New York parties so hard on Saturday night that everybody except the Christians were still in bed when I exited the Lincoln Tunnel and hit the city streets at 7:30 a.m. I made it from Princeton to a free parking space on the street next to the church in less than an hour. Did you hear me? I said: I could make it to a parking place. On the street. For free! In New York!

By the time I would leave church, though, after greeting folks following service, the city would be awake, and restless, and angry that I'd been able to park my car for free. It always seemed like other drivers were out to get me when all I wanted was to get out of their city. Well, I expressed this to a friend who loves New York and everything about it. He started mumbling like some ancient Chinese Zen philosopher. He told me: Do you notice the way water moves around an obstacle and floods into an open space? So you must stream into an open space in the traffic and pour around the other vehicles incessantly impeding your progress. The best way to drive in Manhattan, he concluded, is to flow with the traffic like water. I've come to the conclusion that the best way to drive in Manhattan is to take a cab. Cars cutting in. Busses bullying you over. Bikes breezing by. Pedestrians poking along, talking on their phones, jaywalking right in front of your bumper when you've got the light. Police on horseback like this is Wyoming.

It's maddening. Even when you're not driving. Even when you're on vacation. Why people go to New York to relax is beyond me. It's hard to chill out in that traffic even when some other driver is contending with the chaos. This summer we were up there, my wife and

me, taking our daughter to do a summer program at Columbia University. We'd chosen to stay in New Jersey and take a ferry into the city. At the ferry depot, there were busses. We hopped on one going to Time Square. Across the aisle from us was a couple in their late 70s or early 80s. The lady was sitting by the window, very relaxed. Her agitated husband was sitting on the aisle. The further the bus moved away from the curb, the further he leaned over his wife and looked out the window. I took notice because I wondered what he was looking at. He was looking at the traffic. It was as though he had suddenly been appointed New York's traffic quality control officer. He was watching the cars and commenting on how poorly the drivers were driving. I found this fascinating. Because, clearly, in his opinion, not very many drivers out there on his side of the bus were good drivers. He was mumbling and grumbling and pointing and getting more and more exercised. And when one of the cars did something egregious, like attempt to cut into the lane where the bus already was, he'd cry out to his wife, "Look at this fool!" Over and over again as we crept along through the horrible traffic, he proclaimed, "Look at this fool!" "Look at this fool!" I wanted to calm him down, reassure him, tell him that the bus driver had it all under control, that she was flowing through this traffic like water. But another "look at this fool!" convinced me that I ought to keep my distance. He was a fool for fools and my thinking has always been, once you have identified a fool, stay as far away from him as you can.

I have always been very careful in New York. All the crazy stuff that goes on. Lots of fools in New York. Your town can't be too far behind. Sometimes, with all that's happening in my own city, I think Richmond is a mecca for fools. Then I look in the mirror sometimes and realize that a fool is following me wherever I go. Sometimes, after a particularly frustrating, humbling day, when I've done something inexplicably embarrassing, I'll look in the mirror and sigh, "Just look at this fool!"

You know that is what the angels in heaven must have been saying when they looked down and saw the disciples. In the Gospel of Mark, where I've done most of my scholarly work, the disciples are fools of biblical proportion. Driving through first century Palestine behind

Jesus they were piling up and breaking down in almost comedic ways. After all his healing and exorcising and teaching with Kingdom of God authority, when he calms the storm on the sea, they wonder, “well, who is this guy?” **Look at these fools!** After he feeds five thousand people with just 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish, only a precious few days later, when there are only four thousand people and he has **7** loaves of bread and a **few** fish, they worry that Jesus won’t be able to feed everybody. **Look at these fools!** And then, after the man has just produced enough food to feed 5 thousand people with a paltry 5 loaves of bread and 4 thousand people with a measly 7 loaves of bread, they get on a boat and because there is only one loaf of bread for the 12 of them, they worry whether he’s going to let them go hungry. **Are you kidding me? Look at these fools!**

How can Jesus possibly do anything with them? It wasn’t just the angels thinking it. Probably the human beings around the disciples were thinking it, too, because they, too, saw their inexplicable behavior. Simon and Andrew’s daddy. James and John’s father. Their mothers and sisters and aunts and uncles. They **all** saw it. Sitting on the seashore, they watched the boats come in. They watched those four husbands and fathers who were needed in their families walk off those boats and walk out into some other life, with some odd man who had just come off a 40 day homeless gig out in the desert. No questions asked. They just follow him! They just walk off their boats and walk away behind this man. They don’t think about it. They don’t discuss it. They don’t come say goodbye. They just go! Immediately. Immediately, they just drop everything and follow. I can see their family members all looking and pointing and saying, “Good God! Just look at these fools! Look at ‘em. They just left everything and followed.”

How is it possible to explain this kind of behavior? What makes the disciples **do** this? Eugene Boring says: “There is no parallel to such an unmotivated call story in all of ancient literature.”¹ It is unparalleled because it is un-explainable. Boring concludes: “That the

1. M. Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 60.

fishermen have a boat and employees indicates that they are not penniless peasants; they have something to leave, and they [just] leave it.”² Look at **these** fools!

They don't even know this man they leave everything to follow! I remember when the first Lord of the Rings Movie came out. Like most young men in America, I had fallen in love with those books. And I couldn't wait to see the movies. And I couldn't wait for my wife Sharon to see them with me. Funny how those kinds of things are infectious, isn't it? Not that Sharon was infected with the joy of the Lord of the Rings. This was more like one of those cases where I had to inject her for her own good. Because I needed someone to go with me to see the premier the Thursday night the thing came out, and I needed this person to enjoy the movie as much as I enjoyed the movie. I had to talk her up. Get her ready. Tell her how much she was going to enjoy this thing even though she was very dubious. You **shall** enjoy it! I commanded. You **will** love it! I prophesied.

So, even if it was something less than **immediately**, she dropped everything on the Thursday night of the premiere to follow me to the theater. So, we go out. And I can tell she's enjoying this movie. We're still in the hobbit hometown. Frodo's Uncle Bilbo Baggins has just come home from a great adventure. And he has this ring that we know is going to lead Frodo into an even greater adventure. And along comes this wizard, Gandalf. He's in shadow half the time at the beginning. And Sharon knows nothing about him. He has the potential to be a great hero or a fearsome villain. And at one point, when he challenges Frodo, Sharon leans over to me and asks, trepidation in her voice, because my answer will determine whether she is going to enjoy this movie or not, "Is Gandalf good or bad?" If you haven't read the books, you don't know, right? Not in the beginning. You know he's charismatic, you know he has great power, but you don't know whether he is going to use that power for good or ill, and so you tremble in anticipation of a world he can help build or a world he can help destroy.

2. Boring, *Mark*, 61.

The disciples **have to be** asking the same thing about this Jesus who walks out of the wilderness and calls them to follow. They have got to be asking themselves, “Is this man with the **crazy** claim that the Kingdom of God **is at hand**, sane or insane, good or bad?” Look at these fools! They don’t know! And yet **still** they follow.

God only knows what the family members of those four disciples saw in that moment. They watched their sons and husbands and fathers walk off those boats and fall in line behind this . . . this . . . man. They can’t possibly understand it. I think if we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that we cannot understand it either.

David Jacobsen explains why. He says that Jesus’ call and the disciples’ response to that call “makes little sense to us, in part because we may be inclined to confuse discipleship with a lifestyle choice.”³ Even today, we see a minister following a call to a church as a lifestyle decision. Yes, we talk in terms of call, but we know that key decisions are made around issues of family, of children and schools, of spouses and employment, of communities and comfort level, of job expectations and realistic probability of living up to those expectations. That’s lifestyle. Today, we hear a minister talking about stewardship and we think about lifestyle decisions. How much can I realistically give to the church? How much disposable income can I dispose of to support the movement of God’s Reign as it breaks into history? How much can I set aside to patronize the church’s vision of mission to this city, country, and world and still have sufficient monies left over for college tuition, house payments, car payments, groceries, or living a little? How much can I afford to give? When can I afford to give it? What does what I give to a church mean for what I’m able to give to myself and my family? Those are lifestyle decisions. Real, crucial lifestyle decisions, but lifestyle decisions nonetheless. We can reduce the disciples’ story to lifestyle decision making, too, if we want to. So, **on the boat**, on the Sea of Galilee, you ask, what happens if I don’t follow in the family fishing business? **On the boat**, on the Sea of Galilee, you ask, what happens to my family if I’m not catching enough fish to

3. David Schnasa Jacobsen, *Preaching in the New Creation: The Promise of New Testament Apocalyptic Texts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 37.

earn enough of a living. *Off the boat*, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, you ask, how do I follow this Jesus and bring my family safely and comfortably along? *On the boat*, if you're thinking lifestyle, you're thinking about you and how to take care of you and the ones you love. And that's right. That's appropriate. And that is exactly what is NOT happening in this text when Jesus calls his disciples and they follow. They don't make a lifestyle choice. There is not a chance in Hades that the choice they make is an appropriate lifestyle choice. There is no lifestyle logic that makes their drop-everything-and-follow-Jesus choice make sense.

We don't have sense. We have flames. The fire that fuels this foolishness is Jesus' claim that the Reign of God is an apocalyptic forest fire on the historical horizon. When somebody comes believably proclaiming that God is about to visit, you drop whatever it is you *were* doing and you *start* doing whatever you can do to get ready. The disciples got out of their boats and got underway . . . with Jesus.

This imminent, inbreaking Reign of God Kingdom is what drives the plot of discipleship living. Jesus has just fished the disciples out of their boats and plopped them down, writhing and squirming, on the shore of the arriving Kingdom. Driven by Jesus' kingdom vision, they will be compelled to cast a line out to others and catch them up in this fever of fishing and following. Jesus caught them. They will catch others. Caught up in the kingdom vision, all of them, having given all that they can give of themselves, *everything!*, will go forth from that shore line and fish for people. Is that the gospel truth? Or is that just plain foolishness?

My father, a Baptist deacon of long standing, is a foolish fisherman for the Kingdom of God. Lots of times, following Jesus, fishing for Jesus, he made exactly the wrong lifestyle decision. There were times when I was growing up that I just did not understand the foolishness of that man. Even growing up, I realized just how little money he earned working as a farmer, and when farming didn't pay enough, as a longshoreman, and when long-shoring didn't pay enough, as a meat packer, and when meat packing didn't pay enough, as a meat packer because meat packing was the only alternative he had left. But even as a little boy, I knew. I knew from the stress in his voice sometimes when he talked about money. I knew that

from time to time he had to borrow from relatives or friends to make ends meet. I know how he would come home exhausted from a 12 hour day in the plant, when he had been paid preciously little for every backbreaking, spirit shattering hour he labored. And so I did not understand, as close as I was to the church, as close as I felt to God, as sure as I was that one day I would go into the ministry, why, with so little for himself and us, he gave so much of his precious time and his depleted energy and **our** meager money to God's church. My dad used to tell us that first you give to the church and then you take care of the bills and other necessities of life. You give first to God, you give your best to God, because God gave God's best to us. And then he did it! With our money. With his life. Look at this **fool**.

Over time, my daddy fished me to be a fool just like him. By his word and by his example, he compelled me to follow Jesus just as Jesus had once compelled him. That is what Jesus does, you know. Fishes us, so we will fish others. So we will be fools finding other fools who will inexplicably follow.

Inexplicable because it makes no sense in so many ways. Jesus is not just asking Peter and Andrew, James and John to give up everything and follow him to do a "nice" thing. This is more than just crazy. This is craziness squared. This is craziness at some quantum level. **You're going to fish people?!**

Think about it carefully now, from the proper perspective. Think about real fishing, fishing for fish fishing. That seems like a good thing. A great thing, even. Across the centuries, going fishing with one's parents or one's buddies or even by oneself has been the hallmark of a peaceful, graceful, joyous human scene. Fishing is a good thing. Fishing is a **wonderful** thing. Unless you're the fish. I can't imagine that fish like to be fished. I can't imagine that people like to be fished either. Lured. Baited. Hooked. Hauled up. Flopped over. Dried out. Cut open. Changed forever. You get fished you get changed. You get caught you don't get to go back. The life you knew is gone. A life you could never have anticipated has begun. And somebody else, not you, has chosen to begin it. **That** sound like the kind of thing you want to do to somebody? **That** sound like the kind of thing you want done to you? **That** sound like the kind

of thing you will want to give up your livelihood, your place in the boat, your family for? Well, without a moment's narrative hesitation, they drop everything and follow. And start fishing. For people. Catching and claiming and hooking people. So they will go out and catch and claim and hook more people. Hooking people so people will give everything, even their very lives to God. It's foolishness, I tell you. People don't like to be fished.

I hear people say all the time that they don't like to hear direct asks for time, talent, and treasure in the church. Let's just admit it. We don't like people fishing our calendar, fishing our commitment, and certainly not fishing our finances. Not the IRS. Not the state. Not the people on the street corners. Not the preachers in their pulpits. When I moved away from being a pastor in a church to become a professor in a seminary, one of the things I loved the most was that I no longer had to preach stewardship sermons. I no longer had to ask anybody for anything. Not time. Not talent. Especially not money. Everyone, especially the lay leaders of the church, want you to preach a stewardship sermon, need you to preach a stewardship sermon, and then everybody goes out talking about how they will be glad when stewardship preaching is over and we can get back to preaching Jesus. Well, preaching Jesus is preaching stewardship, because Jesus is the one who started this whole foolish, ask people to give of themselves business. Jesus is the one who fished these fisherman to sacrifice their entire careers, their entire lives. Jesus is the one who fished my daddy to sacrifice what he did not have to a church that had more than he ever would have. Jesus started this! Jesus must have preached one whale of a stewardship sermon to get those disciples to reach down into their pockets and pull out their entire lives and offer up those lives, no questions asked, right on the spot! Oh yes, I loved it. No more stewardship sermons! And now look at me. A seminary president. And almost everything I do ends up with me asking people to give to, to sacrifice for the work of the seminary. I don't just do stewardship sermons any more; I do a stewardship life. Does God have a sense of humor or what? But again, I take comfort in knowing that the life of stewardship began with Jesus, who gave his priceless life, and his disciples who responded by giving everything they had. If Jesus could ask people to give **everything** in the pursuit of God's

kingdom, I ought to be able, and without hesitation, to ask people give **something**. So should you.

Have you seen the bumper sticker that reads: "I'd rather be fishing." With all this theological baggage swirling around in my head, I see that sticker and I want to drive up beside the car with that sticker and I want to yell out the window to the people in that car, "no, you don't! Not really." But Jesus is saying, "Yes, you do! Really!!" **You** want to be fishing for the Kingdom of God. **You** want to override all this Christian decency that won't let you do any Kingdom of God foolishness. **You** want to drop the polite, Protestant whisper that keeps you from shouting a Kingdom of God sermon. Because you know what Jesus knows, what his disciples understood immediately: The Reign of God is on the horizon. You know the love of God is breaking through like a rainbow after a terrible thunderstorm. Because you know it, because you have the good news of Jesus Christ swelling up inside you, you want to cry out like a fool, "**Come follow me following Jesus!** Nothing you have, **Nothing you have** is worth losing what he is offering. **Follow!**"

That is what those four disciples did. That is what YOU ARE going to do. Follow. Jesus. Fish. People.

I'm looking at you, right now, as you are watching this sermon. Jesus is looking at you, right now, as you watch. In his heavenly abode, at the right hand of the Father, looking around at all the gathered multitude, his arms wide, his lips smiling, I think he's saying, look at how people like this set aside their time, give of their treasure, and dedicate their lives and follow me. And fish for people. Look at 'em. Look at those fools.