Come and Follow: What will you leave behind?

Preached on January 22nd, 2017

At Wollaston Congregational Church

**Scripture:** Matthew 4:12-22

For the past few weeks, we have been following the story of Jesus, born in Bethlehem, from the gospel according to Matthew. Matthew begins each episode we have read so far with a backdrop of the political landscape at the time of Jesus. The dominant characters in that landscape are King Herod and his family.

As we remembered at Christmas, “Herod the Great” was a Roman client king of Judea. He was known for colossal building projects that are seen as attempts to memorialize his name. (Think of a huge letter H emblazoned on the side of each building he constructed.)

When Herod learned that wise men from the East were seeking a newborn King of the Jews, he felt threatened. A brutal and paranoid ruler, he ordered the slaying of all the infants in Bethlehem. And so he was the one from whom Joseph was warned to take Mary and the infant Jesus and flee to Egypt. When the family returned to the land of Israel following Herod’s death, Joseph moved them to Galilee for fear of Herod’s son, Archelaus, who was now reigning in Judea.

As we meet Jesus in today’s passage, he is grown. He has been baptized by John the Baptist in the River Jordan and is emerging from retreating into the wilderness for 40 days. At this moment he learns of disturbing political news. John the Baptist has been arrested by another member of the Herod family, Herod Antipas, ruler of the Galilean area. We learn later of John’s criticism of this Herod’s casual marital arrangements. But for now, it seems that it is the Baptist’s call to repentance that is angering this ruler.

In spite of the obvious danger, Jesus immediately picks up where John left off. He proclaims to all who hear: “repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” The contrast of the kingdom of heaven with the Roman Empire and Herod’s tetrarchy is clear.

Unlike John the Baptist, Jesus does not preach in the wilderness. Instead he begins in the poor fishing village, Capernaum, by the Sea of Galilee. Here he finds two pairs of fisher brothers: Simon and Andrew, James and John, casting and mending their nets. And, strangely, he commands them,

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

For many years, I thought of these brothers as small business owners. James and John even work with their father on their own boat. It sounds romantic, in a way, going out daily on the waters to prosper from the harvest of the sea. Sure it was a tough life, but hopefully a good living.

I learned recently that I had misunderstood. The Romans have put a stop to any kind of prosperity for the people who depend on fishing for a livelihood. Capernaum and the surrounding villages serve the extravagant city, Sepphoris, where the relocated dignitaries live. This is where the fish goes. The Romans control the fishing industry, by means of local rulers, imposing taxes, quotas and tolls, and creaming off profits. Even the simple fisher folk’s lives are controlled by the Herods of the world. They are the “middle poor”, scraping a living.

When Jesus gives the call to follow, Matthew tells us that the young men immediately drop their nets and go. They are not walking away from a humming business. Rather, they are entering into discipleship with someone who is offering a change of life, perhaps for the better.

Jesus’ message may fill Simon and Andrew, James and John, with hope. They may feel hope for their families, that they will finally have a fair share of the wealth of the land. Even so, they will be leaving their nets - territory that is familiar and comfortable - for something unknown, and possibly dangerous. For anyone, this takes courage.

When Jesus says “come, follow me” what is the alternative? Is he such a compelling preacher that the young men simply cannot resist? Or, perhaps, they are aware of another truth: that when they are not following Jesus, they are automatically following something else.

For the fisher folk of Jesus’ time, that “something else” means the way of their political-economic culture - the way of the empire. Their livelihoods are subject to the control of the oppressor. And the system is not working for them. While they continued to cooperate and fish for the Romans, they are following the way of the empire. Their nets and their boats are their investment in that system. Once they leave those things behind, they are free to follow the way of Jesus. And in following they are invited to a new way of life in which they are may use their skills as fishermen to participate in the heavenly kingdom. They will learn to preach, teach and heal the sick.

For us, as for the fishermen, it takes courage to change the direction we are going. That is the meaning of the word “repent”. It means to turn, toward God. And to turn toward God means to turn away from something else.

Our culture is so much a backdrop in our lives, that we often do not recognize that it is what we follow by default. Even when it isn’t working for us. The call to repent, means that we are invited like Simon and Andrew, like James and John, to lay aside our investment in what is not working for us.

Some years ago, my husband and I were deciding where to buy a home and raise our children. We looked for a reputable school system and hoped to get our kids involved in sports and other activities. We didn’t anticipate the choices we would need to make down the line.

Now, I have to say, at various times while living in the United States

I have experienced culture shock. By the time our son was entering High School I thought I had dealt with it all. But I was wrong. As a strong swimmer, Ben wanted to sign on for the swim team. I went with him to the information meeting and to check in with the coach about the first week of practices.

This week overlapped with the school musical for which Ben was playing in the pit band. The coach told me she would expect “give and take” in the arrangements. She would let him go for a couple of practices, but she’d want to see him letting the music give sometime too. This seemed a little intense for a 14. Later, I learned this was just the tip of the iceberg.

That year, we decided we would visit our family in England for the Christmas break. It meant missing “non-mandatory” practices for Ben, but he was embarrassed to discover it also meant that he was “benched” for the first swim meet following vacation. The coach also threatened to withhold the all-important “varsity letter.” All because he had spent Christmas with his grandparents. No matter that this was contrary to ruling in the athletic department handbook.

At that point, we realized that we needed to make a list of priorities for our family. And that list needed to begin with God. We decided faith and family would come first, academics would follow, ahead of sports and other activities. More than a few coaches were not happy with our choices.

Fortunately, our kids were never involved in intensive sports in spring, that would have required mandatory practices during break. Again, this was contrary to the avowed values of the meaningless handbook. Our kids were able to participate in our church’s annual youth group mission trip each year: helping to rebuild homes destroyed by Hurricane Katrina; serving in the soup kitchens of Boston; discovering what it means to be poor in Appalachia. Other students had to make very hard choices, and were frequently excluded, in spite attempts by our church to negotiate with the High School athletics department.

For our kids, and for many others, the boats and nets they needed to let go in order to follow Jesus included that great American idol: sports.

Sometimes, we need the time to pause and assess, is our buy-in to the culture working for us, or oppressing us? Are there nets or boats we need to let go in order to follow Jesus?

One way that might happen is our buy-in to the media portrayal of

an unrealistic ideal female body. This drives many women and girls to despair, seeing their value as being based on the number on the bathroom scale or their dress size. Is the culture which pressures us to starve ourselves one of the nets we need to let go of? How much more free would we be to follow Jesus would we be if we accepted bodies as being beloved and beautiful as they are, in God’s sight?

Another way might be to turn away from the culture’s demands us to work harder, to earn more, to buy more. It is a culture that measures worth by pay check, and capacity to by material goods. It is a culture that leads many of us into the oppression of credit card debt. Is that one of the boats we need to let go?

How much more free would we be to follow Jesus, if we could accept that the work we do is enough, and the things we already own are more than enough?

But most of all, our culture, like all empires tells us lies. It tells us that we are safest staying within our own small groups. It confines our interactions to people with whom we share opinions and agree. It tells us we are best off avoiding contact with the “other” in political opinion, in race, in faith, in country of origin, in sexual orientation and identity. How much more free would we be to follow Jesus, if we found the courage to step out of our comfort zones to engage in learning and dialogue with those who seem to be “other” to us.

When Jesus called Simon and Andrew, James and John, they left behind their nets and boats and went to places they had never expected to go. They met people they had never expected to meet. They traded their fishing skills, for preaching, teaching and healing skills. They learned to bring light into places of darkness. This took courage - the courage to step out of their comfort zones, out of the constricting and dominant culture of the Roman Empire, and into the freedom of the kingdom of heaven.

May we all find the courage to do likewise.

Amen!