

**“The Early Stages of Jesus’ Ministry”**  
**Sermon Series on *The King and His Kingdom* #4**  
**First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC**  
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**October 1, 2017**  
**(Mt. 4:12-25)**

**Introduction.**

I’ve got a grammar joke for you this morning. It’s a joke about verbs. “The past, the present, and the future walk in a bar. It was tense.” (Get it? Okay, I’ll wait for some of you to catch on. Get it now? If you’re still confused, ask your neighbor after the sermon.)

As we read through this passage in Matthew 4, there are three verbs that stand out the most to me in this text. As I study this passage, the three verbs that stand out to me are: Repent; Follow; and Fish. Let’s consider each of these verbs in this story about the early stages of Jesus’ ministry. The first one is Repent.

**I. Repent.**

*“When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, He returned to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, He went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali – to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah.... From that time on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near’” (Mt. 4:12-14,17).*

When Jesus began His public ministry, He left His home in Nazareth and started out in a region of Israel called Galilee. If you think about it, that’s a pretty strange place from which to begin. I mean, from a public relations strategy Galilee wasn’t the center of political, religious or economic power in Israel. That would be further south in the city of Jerusalem. To the influential people in the capital city, Galilee was considered the backwoods or the backwaters of Israel, not exactly a place where important things happen.

However, upon closer examination there are some very good reasons for Jesus to begin there. For example, Galilee was the most northerly district of Palestine, and, while it wasn’t very large, it was densely populated. Even though it was only 50 miles long and 25 miles wide, scholars say it had over 200 villages and each had a population of at least 1,500 people. So there were a lot of people there – about 300,000!

In addition, Galilee was surrounded by Gentile populations. The Samaritans were directly south of Galilee, and to the north was Syria. East of Galilee were regions that also didn’t have much of a Jewish presence. So Galilee was an ideal

place to proclaim a message which would later come to be called a “light to the nations.” In addition, because of their social and economic engagement with other kinds of people, the Jews who lived in Galilee were open to new ideas. In many ways Galilee was the perfect place for a new teacher with a new message to gain a hearing.

The fact that Jesus began His ministry in Galilee was also further proof to Matthew that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, and he cites a prophecy in the Old Testament to corroborate it. *“This was to fulfill what was written through the prophet Isaiah: ‘Land of Zebulun and Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles – the people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned’ (Mt. 4:14-16).*

So Jesus began His ministry in Galilee, and He started out by preaching a simple central message, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”* There is a lot in this short summary of Jesus’ preaching, and the first thing Jesus said was “repent.” As you may know, the Greek word which is translated “repent” is the word *metanoia*. It means “a change of mind which leads to a change of heart that results in a change of direction.” In other words, Jesus was saying “turn from your old ways, and turn to God. Lift your eyes from the earth and look to heaven. Reverse your direction, stop walking away from God, and begin to go after Him.”

A diet is a change of direction. It’s a big change in the way you eat. A new budget is a change in direction. For others, a new job can be a change in direction. If you went to Chapel Hill and your daughter just enrolled at Duke this fall, you might experience a change in your team allegiance, and now you’ll start cheering for the Blue Devils. (Okay, that really isn’t possible, is it?!)

But the biggest change we can ever make in life is to turn from just living for ourselves and to begin to live for God and for other people. In His preaching Jesus asked His listeners to turn around, head in a different direction, and reorient their lives around the kingdom of heaven. Repentance actually involves a thousand little steps, but it begins with that first Spirit-inspired sense that my life needs to change and I need to go in a different direction than the one in which I’ve been headed.

Have you responded to the first verb of Jesus? Have you ever come to a place where you realize you need to repent, you need to change the direction you’re heading in? And are you willing, with God’s help, to make that change? We will never know life to its fullest until we actually repent.

## **II. Follow.**

The second verb is “follow.” Our passage tells us that as Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, He invited two pairs of brothers – Peter and Andrew, and James

and John – to become His disciples. At the time of Jesus, the Sea of Galilee was filled with fishermen and Capernaum was a fishing village, so it's not surprising that fishermen would be in the first group of Jesus' disciples.

Most scholars believe this wasn't the first time these four men had seen Jesus, or He them. As the apostle John tells the story, at least some of them had already been disciples of John the Baptist (Jn. 1:35). No doubt the four men had already heard Jesus speak before, but in this moment the Lord issued a challenge to them to abandon their occupations and their whole way of life and become His disciples. In effect, Jesus was saying, "Become my students, join my school, become my apprentice, and come live with me."

Ordinarily, a would-be disciple would approach a rabbi and ask if he could become the rabbi's disciple, but here we see Jesus take the initiative. Later on, Jesus would remind His disciples, "*You did not choose me, but I chose you...*" (Jn. 15:16). And the invitation Jesus gave is simply "Follow Me." The tense of the Greek verb Matthew uses here is the present imperative, which stresses continuity. It means "live a life of following Me."

Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once reminded the formal and dead church in Denmark during the 19<sup>th</sup> century that Jesus wanted followers, not admirers. A couple of years ago, Kyle Idleman picked up on this idea, and he wrote a book entitled *Not a Fan*. In it he writes about the difference between being a fan of Jesus and being one of His followers. Idleman says that a fan is defined as "an enthusiastic admirer." There are a lot of Christians I would say are more of a fan than they are a follower of Christ. They admire Jesus and they even want to be like Him, but they also admire Steph Curry and want to be like him too. They're fans.

But if you read through the gospels you'll discover that Jesus wasn't very interested in having fans. What He wanted was followers. He wasn't very concerned about the size of the crowds that came to hear Him speak; Jesus was more interested in the level of commitment of the people who were willing to follow Him.

There's a passage in each of the three synoptic gospels that says, "*Whoever wants to be My disciple must deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me*" (Luke 9:23). For a lot of people, the invitation to follow Jesus by denying oneself and taking up their cross is often missed. They like John 3:16, but somehow Luke 9:23 gets left out. But Idleman says here's what he's discovered – it isn't enough just become a fan. And until you completely surrender your life to Jesus Christ, and until you give him every part of who you are, you'll never experience the real life, the true life He wants you to have.

Are you just a fan or are you a follower of Jesus? Be honest.

### **III. Fish.**

The passage concludes with Jesus saying, “*‘Come, follow Me, and I will help you catch people instead of fish.’ At once they left their nets and followed Him*” (Mt. 4:19,20). In saying this, Jesus spoke their language, and He used a metaphor that resonated with these fishermen. They caught a vision for how they could help influence the world, and they wanted to become a part of the movement of God’s Spirit which they could see in the life and preaching of Jesus. They accepted the challenge and left everything to follow Him.

Fishing is an interesting metaphor for Jesus to use. Fishing is a very different experience than hunting is. In fishing you take less aim, and you hope the fish will swim into your net or come by and take hold of your hook. You have to be subtle, and you have to be patient. William Barclay observed that fishing requires perseverance, an eye for the right moment, an ability to fit the bait to the fish, and an aptitude for staying out of sight.<sup>1</sup>

Steve Lineberger of our congregation is an expert fisherman, and the last couple of summers he has taken my sons and me deep sea fishing off the coast of North Carolina when we’ve been there at the beach. While we haven’t been very successful in our outings (the fish simply weren’t biting), I’ve been impressed with Steve’s remarkable knowledge about fishing and all the fancy gear he has on his boat to find fish. But the thing that impresses me the most about Steve when it comes to fishing is his passion. Even though Steve suffers from motion sickness, you can’t keep him off the ocean. And there are few things in life that give him more pleasure and about which he is more passionate than teaching people how to fish and taking them on fishing expeditions.

I wish we all had Steve’s kind of expertise and passion when it comes to fishing for *people*. I wish we were all willing to push past our discomfort and the motion sickness we can experience when we talk to someone about Jesus. I wish we all had a better knowledge about how to find searching people with spiritual sonar, and we could spot them when they come across our paths. I think Jesus wants each of us to become as good at fishing for people as Steve is at fishing for fish.

But we’ve got some challenges today in fishing for people, and we need to make some adjustments. Let me explain. Fifty years ago, the Grand Banks of New England that stretches all the way up into Canada was thick with cod, and the fish used to “school” together so that it was easy to catch a whole lot of fish back then. But all that has changed, and now the fishing industry in that part of the world is suffering greatly. When I was in seminary, there were probably 75 fishing boats in Gloucester, MA, on the north shore of Boston near the school I attended. But today there are less than 10. The fish don’t “school” together like they once did, and people are now finding it very difficult simply to find them. And they are also finding it’s very difficult to make a living catching fish now.

Here's the point. The spiritual landscape in the U.S. has also changed a great deal in the last 50 years, and it's going to take a different kind of fishing for people if we in the church expect to be successful. The situation we find ourselves in today is akin to the fishing industry off the coast of New England. Things have changed, and we need to adapt.

Fifty years ago, it was fashionable to go to church, and lots of people simply "schooled" together to find a place where they could worship God and raise their kids together. But today America is the fifth largest mission field in the world when you look at sheer numbers. China, India, Indonesia, and Russia are the only countries that have more people who don't know Christ than we do.

In the past 12 months 100 million Americans haven't set foot in a church since October 1<sup>st</sup> of last year, and 43% of Americans don't identify themselves as belonging to any faith community. Ten percent have never been to church ever, but 33% are what we would call de-churched – they used to attend, but either they got bored and they got hurt and they're no longer involved. The strategies for doing church that were so effective 50 years ago no longer work, and we've got to adapt and change our approach and our methods if we're going to catch people like fish in this new day.

Do you remember the old nursery rhyme "Little Bo Peep"? It goes like this:

Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep,  
And she doesn't know where to find them.  
Leave them alone, and they'll come home,  
Wagging their tails behind them.

That's the way many churches approach evangelism today. Leave people alone, and they'll find their way to God. But they never do. We've got to go after them.

Little Bo Peep fell fast asleep,  
And dreamt she heard them bleating.  
But when she awoke, she found it a joke,  
For they were still a-fleeting.

Then up she took her little crook,  
Determined for to find them.  
She found them indeed, but it made her heart bleed,  
For they'd left their tails behind them.

A study done several years ago revealed that the average Presbyterian shares his/her faith about once every 15 years. Well, friend, maybe this is your year! Will you tell someone about Christ in the coming week? We've all got to take the

calling of Jesus seriously if we're going to reach the world with the gospel, and the eternal destiny of people's souls hangs in the balance. Will you ask God to help you fish for people this next week?

### **Conclusion.**

*The Hobbit – An Unexpected Journey* is the prequel to the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy by J.R.R. Tolkien, and it's a great book. The story follows the journey of Bilbo Baggins, a hobbit who is reluctantly pushed into traveling with 13 undersized dwarves and a wizard named Gandalf to try and recover their treasure from a dragon and help them regain their homeland.

There's a great scene in the opening of the book in which Bilbo is invited by Gandalf to go on a journey and share in an adventure, but Bilbo gives every reason in world why he can't go. He thinks about all the comforts of home he'd have to give up, and all the ways his life would be inconvenienced. After a night of entertaining the dwarves and them making a total wreck of his home, Bilbo finds himself compelled to go, much to his own surprise. On an impulse he runs out the door, catches up with the group, and says he's all in.

*The Hobbit* reminds me that every great journey and every great adventure begins with a first step, a decision to go. If Bilbo Baggins never ventured outside his home, he never would have seen and experienced all the things he did. He was reluctant to begin the journey at all. However, the lure of the adventure plied him out of his home and put him on the road, and Bilbo's life would never be the same again. It would be the adventure of a lifetime that eventually changed not only his life but also that of his young nephew Frodo many years later.

The invitation Jesus gave to the four men in our passage He extends to you and me today. "Come follow Me." John Ortberg has written that whenever God interrupts a person's life and extends a call to them, it never means that life is going to be easy. God never gives easy jobs to people, and He asks them to trust. He never says, "I have an assignment for you, but it won't take much time, and it won't be very difficult, and it won't change your life very much." There are no stories in the Bible like that. Whenever God calls a person, the most He promises is, "I will be with you." And God will be with you, too, if you say "yes!" to Jesus with your whole life and commit to following Him. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 1*, p. 79.