

Message for 6 February 2022 – John Oh

“life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans.” Yes, it is. Life is what happens to us while we are busy making other plans.

Life is a gift from God. full of miracle, surprise, scars, joy, fear, happiness, faith and life is such a journey.

In the bible passage today we have read, there is a story that calling that life-changing happened to the fishermen who lived in 2000 years ago.

Nevertheless, as we read the text, the disciples did not receive their calling from Jesus while they were in a designated sacred space like the synagogue, holy place or even while they were in prayer or contemplation in their own homes.

Their call did not come while they were quietly listening for it but, rather, at the end of a long, sweaty work session, when they were discouraged and ready to pack it in for the day. They were not doing anything grand or holy; they were just washing their nets.

Along came this itinerant preacher and healer.

He was probably a nuisance after a long night of hard labour, but they dutifully showed their respect to the rabbi and shoved the boats back in the water to carry him out a little way from shore, as he asked.

Perhaps they had witnessed his healings or stood astounded by his exorcisms or listened to his sermons. Maybe there was something he said that caught their attention, impressed them enough to take him halfway seriously when he said, “put out into the deep water”

They wearily told him that this was not a good place for fishing – nothing good was going to happen here. Only then, in the midst of weariness and pessimism, did Jesus show them something amazing and new: a sign of holy abundance, a surplus of nourishment in the midst of seemingly barren waters.

Simon, one of the fishermen, felt unworthy of such abundance. Jesus said not to fear it; it was a sign of the new vocation that was being set before him and all the disciples.

With newfound faith, they got up and went to “fish for people” to lead lives renewed in trust and service.

Our vocation too comes to us in the midst of our everyday life and work – not apart from it or before we even get started doing things with our lives.

That is not to say that we do not sometimes need to take quiet time apart to reflect and discern, as Jesus himself did in the previous chapter in Luke.

However, God does not wait for the times when life is settled and still to call us. God finds us wherever we are, whatever we are doing, and shows us something – often with the very materials of our everyday lives and work. God uses the details of our particular time and place to catch our attention and throw us a new challenge.

We think we are just humming along, doing what we always do, and suddenly we see something that causes us to wonder: what in my life would need to change in order to be the new person God is calling me to be?

This sounds good, but it is not always as obvious as in this story from Luke. How do we actually know when God is beckoning us toward a new future, a new form of service?

No messenger shows up with a ton of fish to throw on our desk or workbench. Like the disciples, we do have to do something to receive our calling. The disciples, weary as they were, agreed to put their boats back in the water at Jesus' behest. Like them, we have to be open to the voice of the stranger, the wandering Wise One in our midst.

He may come in the form of a literal stranger, someone unknown to us, from whom we might prefer to turn away, or in the form of a friend who provokes us with a word we did not expect or want to hear. He may come in the form of an inner voice we would prefer not to acknowledge, or a part of ourselves that we have silenced in order to keep peace with ourselves or others, but at the expense of not deepening our lives.

We have to practice paying attention to the strange and the surprising, because strange and surprising messages really do come to us, virtually every day, and they may bear an unlikely holy word for us in answer to our weary questions. Just when we are most prone to wonder, "is this all there is?" or "what do I do now to get out of this?" Jesus comes and drops something sloppy and squirmy into the midst of our too-small lives. The surprising catch becomes nourishment, if we let it.

Like the disciples, we also have to throw our nets out into the deep waters. Shallow, tentative paddling is not allowed if we are to discern where God is calling us. This requires us to take risks. We could fail and come up with nothing. The boat could capsize.

The nets we have fashioned for our safe, contained selves might break under the weight of our unlived lives.

Jesus tells us, as he tells Simon and the others, not to be afraid. When we risk what we have known for the sake of responding to God's call on our lives, we will be given all the abundance we need and more.

Living into our vocations may well bring hardships, even suffering, but there is a kind of suffering and "quiet desperation" that also comes with keeping our lives small.

We will know that we are on the right path, as the disciples do, if we can sense that the new life of service beckoning us, despite the risks, is one that offers sustenance and joy. Who are the people God is giving us to fish, and what is the glorious catch that awaits us if we hear and act upon God's unlikely, holy invitation?

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