



Sermon of January 24, 1999



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"HAVE YOU HEARD?"

Isaiah 9:1-4

Matthew 4:12-23

This is the day of our Charge Conference, the annual meeting of this congregation when we evaluate and celebrate the past year. And indeed, we can give thanks to God for all that has happened during this past year, and look forward to the future to what God has in store for us, particularly as we look forward to a new millennium.

So it is appropriate that on this Sunday the gospel lesson be Matthew's version of the call of the disciples. That is what I want us to look at this morning. There are two classic interpretations of this scene. One is by John Greenleaf Whittier, and the other by Albert Schweitzer.

We can find Whittier's interpretation in the second verse of the hymn that we have just sung, "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind."

In simple trust like theirs who heard,
Beside the Syrian sea,
The gracious calling of the Lord,
Let us, like them, without a word,
Rise up and follow thee.

You read the full text of that hymn and you will see that Whittier was looking for religious experience, an experience of transcendence in this world, a presence, some reality or mystery greater than the self.

Whittier must have been caught up in what was all the rage in 19th century America, at least among the sophisticated in New England where he lived. It was called Transcendentalism. If you remember your American history, Transcendentalism reacted against the stern, distant, sovereign God of the New England Puritans, and looked instead for a softer, gentler presence of God here in the world about us. They believed they found that presence in nature. They said nature is where you will find God.

You can see this in the hymn. Whittier begins on an orthodox note, the first verse asking God for forgiveness for our "foolish ways," then calling for a good old Calvinist response, to live lives of righteousness and praise. The greatest of the Calvinist traditions, the Presbyterian tradition, the Westminster Catechism, says that the chief end of human beings is to praise God. Isaac Watts, the great Calvinist hymn writer, wrote, "I'll praise my maker while I've breath; and when my voice is lost in death, praise shall employ my nobler powers." Praising God is the purpose of human life, according to that tradition, and that is where Whittier begins the poem.

Then the second verse, our text for this morning, the call of the disciples by the sea. It is a call to respond quietly, in simple trust. The third verse, Jesus praying quietly, beside the Sea of Galilee, out of doors. The fourth verse asks God to, "Drop thy still dews of quietness." We are getting quieter and quieter. Then the last verse,

Breathe through the heats of our desire
Thy coolness and thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm.

He seems to call for us to sit quietly in nature, to hear God speak through nature, through "earthquake, wind, and fire." Which is interesting and ironic, because the reference to "earthquake, wind, and fire" is from I Kings, the story of Elijah, where it is used with just the opposite message.

Elijah is hiding in a cave, running away from Jezebel, the wicked queen. He is feeling sorry for himself. God comes to Elijah, and speaks to him. Only the text says that God does not speak through "earthquake, wind, and fire," which was the expected way. It was expected that God would speak through nature. I Kings says explicitly, "No," God is not in the "earthquake, wind,

and fire," but in a "still, small voice." Which I take to mean Elijah's conscience, because the voice says to Elijah, "Get out of here. I've got something for you to do. I've got a mission for you to perform, so stop moping, or meditating, or whatever it is that you are doing up here in this cave, and get to work."

Which is just like the call to the disciples. "Follow me. I've got something for you to do. I will make you fishers of men." Jesus didn't say, "Follow me, and I will take you to a spiritual life retreat." He said, "Follow me, and I will take you into the world to change the world."

Whittier, and a whole lot of other people, believe that you find God in nature. I have met those people. I have pastored them. They say they can worship God just as well, or better, walking through the woods, or playing golf. I don't doubt that. But I know more people lose religion playing golf than find it.

I don't doubt that you can experience a transcendent presence in nature, this mystery that is greater than ourselves and is revealed in the beauty of nature. But that is not the way God revealed himself in the Bible. The Bible is not a book of nature poetry. It is a book of history. The claim of the Bible is that the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and the God of Jesus, speaks to us more in events, historical events, than through nature. He speaks to us in conscience, rather than in sunsets.

But it is still a lovely hymn, and I really like it, "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind." But I like Schweitzer's interpretation of this scene better. I think he is closer to what the Bible is trying to say to us. His interpretation comes in the last lines of his famous book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.

That book was a study of all the biographies that had been written about Jesus up to that time, the end of the 19th century. He concluded that you cannot write an historical biography of Jesus. Anyone who writes a biography of Jesus, he said, is writing about himself. For history is like a deep well. As you look down the shaft of the well, through two thousand years of history, what you see is your own reflection in the pool at the bottom. But, he said, Jesus is not discovered through biography anyway. The Resurrection means that Jesus is not some figure who lived in the past and is now gone. Jesus is someone who lives with us now.

He used the scene at the end of the Gospel of John to illustrate this, the same scene that takes place in Matthew at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. In the Gospel of John it is at the end, after the Resurrection. The disciples think that Jesus is dead, so they go back to Galilee and take up their old business of fishing. Jesus appears to them, just as he did at the beginning of his ministry. Now he comes to them in their despair after the Resurrection. This time he says, "Feed my sheep." But it is the same thing. It is a call to discipleship.

Schweitzer says that is what we should expect in this post-resurrection era. We live in the time after the Resurrection, so we should expect that Jesus is with us, and still calling us. These are Schweitzer's famous words.

He comes to us as one unknown. As of old by the lakeside he came to those men who knew him not, and speaks to us the same word, "Follow thou me," and sets

us to the tasks that he has to fulfill in our time.

That's the clue. God calls us to fulfill the tasks that he has for our time. That is why this text is so appropriate at a Charge Conference, as we examine why we are here, what are we supposed to do, what is God calling us to do. The answer is, "Follow me." That is the call. But what does that mean? So we look at what comes next. It is the last verse in this text. Matthew says that Jesus, after he called the disciples, began "preaching the good news and bringing healing to all the people."

So if we are to follow Jesus, I would imagine that is what we ought to be doing too, preaching good news and bringing healing, wholeness, and reconciliation in an appropriate way to the needs of people in our time. But what would that look like?

Some years ago I was flying back to San Diego after attending a meeting. I got on a plane hoping that I would sit next to a "sleeper." A "sleeper" is my idea of a great traveling companion on an airplane, one who goes to sleep so that I can get some reading done.

Actually the person sitting next to me wasn't a "sleeper," he was a "walker," which is even better. Evidently he took one look at me, and after the plane got aloft, he got up and left, never came back. So I had this empty seat next to me.

The "talker" was in the row in front of me. Now I am not an eavesdropper, but you are packed into coach, so you can't help but hear the conversation of those people sitting around you. The "talker" started in immediately, getting acquainted with the man who sat next to her. They decided to get comfortable, so they put their seats in the reclining position. I hope that you appreciate where that put me. If I had been a dentist, I would have been ready to go to work.

So here they are in my lap. I don't know the woman's name. I don't think she ever said it, not that I recall, although I think I know everything else about her. I called her, "Mrs. Garrulous." I chose that name intentionally. "Garrulous" means "to chatter." I looked it up, there is a wonder definition of it in the dictionary. Garrulous means "to talk ceaselessly about unimportant things." I have heard garrulous used as an adjective for birds that don't shut up. It seemed to fit.

About a half an hour into the flight that is what I named her, Mrs. Garrulous. About another twenty minutes I thought of her first name, "Fortissima." That's a Latin word. It means "very loud." I kind of liked what I named her, Fortissima Garrulous. She is Italian, she married a Greek.

Anyone sitting in coach knew all about her life. She was going to Dallas to buy a house. She and her husband were moving to Dallas from North Carolina. Her husband had gotten a new job in Dallas. This is the fifth move for that family in ten years. He is always going to new jobs, always moving up. They have two children: six and four, a boy and a girl. They are into everything: soccer, dance. The boy is taking Karate to build his self-confidence. Six years old, he needs self-confidence.

Fortissima taught herself decorating. She is a decorator now. She's "into" decorating, that is the way she put it. I would think so after five moves. She used to be a cheerleader. Actually she

used to teach cheerleading. But now she is into decorating with her sister. She has three sisters. All four of them, she says, are going to be on Family Feud.

Now I was trying to read while all of this was going on, my book placed between their heads. I read one page over four times. All this chatter about unimportant things. But then I began to hear it differently. I realized there was a sadness to what she was saying. It wasn't really idle chatter. It was more like a confession, more like a plea out of desperation.

I remembered St. Exupery, who wrote *The Little Prince*. He also wrote about flying. St. Exupery was one of the first aviators. He flew the mail in North Africa and South America at the beginning of this century. He wrote beautiful books about flying. *Wind, Sand, and Stars* I think is where I read this. On one flight his plane crashed in the North African desert. He survived the ordeal, but it changed his life. He came out of it with a heightened expectation of what life can be, of what we are capable of, of what heights we can achieve as human beings, and what little time we have in which to achieve it.

After the crash he returned to France. He took a train from Marseilles to Paris. He wrote about the faces of the people on the train. "All I can see in these faces is the silent misery of wasted lives." He described a man on the train he called, "The Bourgeois of Toulouse." "Why didn't somebody shake this man early in his life before this clay hardened and get him to live the kind of life that he is capable of. And now that musician, that poet, that artist, that craftsman under this man is gone, and it will never happen. Why didn't somebody shake him to get him to live all the life he is capable of."

I thought of that passage as I listened to the woman talk incessantly, especially when she said, "You know, I asked my husband if we could settle down now, not move anymore. We have enough. We ought to spend more time with our children before they go wrong. But he told me that he doesn't have enough. He wants more."

St. Exupery was appalled when he came back from the desert experience and saw what he described as the way the machine stamped out these common, joyless lives, all of them looking alike. He could see that because he had just seen something else, something exciting and adventurous, something that claimed his life, that demanded something, and then gave his life back to him, renewed.

Then it occurred to me, this scene of the call of the disciples takes place immediately after Jesus returns from the desert. Could it be that Jesus, too, came back and saw common, joyless lives, and said, "I have come that you might have life, and have it in abundance." And then set out with his disciples to preach this good news, and bring wholeness, healing, and reconciliation.

That is why we are here, to proclaim this good news in our day, in a way that it will be heard. To speak to the spiritual needs of the people in our time. To bring healing and wholeness to individuals and to their relationship with other people.

I have asked, can it be as simple as it was back then? In all the gospel reports, it says that when Jesus called the disciples, "immediately" they got up and follow him.

In simple trust like theirs who heard,
Beside the Syrian sea,
The gracious calling of the Lord,
Let us, like them, without a word,
Rise up and follow thee.

I didn't use to think it could be that simple. But I think it is. I think it is that simple for people who are bored with their lives, and have reached that point where they realize now that they can't buy what they are really looking for. Or, those people who have gained enough wisdom now to know that making it big isn't as important as making your life count. And those who see that life itself is a gift given to us with infinite potential, but with a limited time in which to experience it. And especially it's that simple for those who have discovered that the fullness of life can be found only when we give ourselves to something that is greater than ourselves, like the Kingdom of God, the coming of which we pray for every day.

Two thousand years ago now Jesus came saying, "The kingdom of God is at hand. Follow me, and I will lead you there." If you have wised up, if you have figured out what life is all about, then it is really quite simple. You will follow. In simple trust like theirs who heard, Beside the Syrian sea, The gracious calling of the Lord.

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,
that we might be servants of others,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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