

Isaiah 9:1-4

Psalm 27:1, 4-9

Matthew 4:12-23

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Irene Pak Lee

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## “Here I Am”

The well-known poem “The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost has been coming across my mind and heart and also my research and conversations recently. I love that poem but I had not really read it or thought of it in quite a while so as it kept coming across my own path, I decided to pay attention this week.

Many of you know what this poem is about, even if you do not have it memorized. It’s about a traveler walking through the woods, coming to a fork in the path. The traveler looks at one path and then the other. One seems to be more traveled than the other. She ponders her decision: which road to take?

And in the concluding lines, the poet speaks about the human experience many of us relate to and the lines many of us remember:

*I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*

In today’s gospel reading, we read the story about when a young man leaves his hometown and sets out on a wild kingdom of God adventure and takes that road less traveled. It’s a such a small detail in the story, but I couldn’t help but notice it this week. Scripture tells us, “Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. *He left Nazareth* and made his home in Capernaum by the sea.”

If we pause there for a second in this often overlooked verse, we learn the enormity of the choice that Jesus made as he began his ministry. He could have just stayed in Nazareth. Instead, Jesus left all that was familiar up to that point in his life. His life as a carpenter, his mother, his siblings... he’s leaving the security of a steady income, his childhood home and hometown, and a known community. In the gospel of Matthew, prior to this departure, Jesus has just come through the wilderness, and he’s come back different. He cannot ignore the path that has been prepared for him, the call he’s always known in his heart. And so he goes.

And as we read through the rest of this passage, we see it happen again and again. Walking along the shores of the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Peter and Andrew and he said to them "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And they leave what they know, all that is familiar to them, their community, their steady work and they follow Jesus. And then again with two others, James and John, right in front of their dad Zebedee, as they are mending their nets. "Follow me," and they leave what they know, the boat, their father, their current task, and they go. The road less traveled-the road completely unknown.

Okay, so we know that this happens. And I know I could wax sentimental about how glorious it is to follow Jesus and how courageous it was of them to leave everything behind to follow Jesus...after all, they become part of the 12 disciples, the inner circle of the Son of God! Isn't that amazing??

But here's what I really want to say following this enormous leap of faith they all take to take that road less traveled.

WHY??? Why in the world would you do that?!

Now Jesus, I understand a little bit. After all, he IS the son of God, he was born for this. Even as his mother Mary is sad that he's leaving, she also knew this was coming. An angel told her early on so she had a heads up. But why did these fishermen leave everything and go with him? Was the idea of fishing for people really that appealing?

I'll be honest, this analogy of fishing for people is not one that resonates with me personally. I also carry a lot of previous theological baggage with this analogy and this story and I'm sure I am not the only one here that does. I remember in college going to conferences where the preacher would charismatically tell us how exciting it was to follow Jesus and get you all pumped up-you were to leave behind all that you are, even changing who you are to fit into a mold or a shape or voice of a pre-created box of who they saw God to be-which was quite frankly a really narrow framework for a vast expansive Creator-and then we were to go on a far flung adventure to the other side of the world to "fish for people"-which meant somehow capturing, cajoling, and recruiting people for Jesus. All you needed to do was get these wandering fish to say a special "sinner's prayer" and they would be saved from some kind of eternal hell. I'll be honest, it was hard not to get caught up in the energy, the charisma, and the urgency of that kind of theology. It works for a lot of people...but after a while, it can feel pretty shallow. I always felt like something was wrong and missing in all of that. You can blame or thank my Presbyterian roots and upbringing for that. ☺

I know I am not the only one in this room that has heard that kind of framework and message about this story. That's how these preachers made sense of this passage and many still do, but that trajectory does not make sense to me anymore.

In a book titled *A Geography of God*, Michael Lindvall writes something that might help us come out of that mindset. He writes, "Jesus' disciples do not appear to be God-haunted religious searchers. When he found them, not a one of them was at prayer in the synagogue. They were not searching for God: they were at their nets and counting tables."

Friends, for me this means that actually, to follow Jesus does not mean we have to become something completely different. It also does not mean we have to fit a mold of what we think religiosity should look like. The disciples in our passage today and the disciples who are called later were doing what they knew how to do—they were just being themselves...and Jesus calls them to do what they know how to do and be who they are in a more expansive way.

Jesus' invitation to these first disciples was specific, rooted in the culture, language, and vocation that they knew best. He was not asking them to abandon all that they knew and who they were. He was inviting them to expand on the gifts he knew they already had. I will make you fish for people, he says. These four fishermen would have understood the nuances of that metaphor in ways that I know I never will. They knew from their years of experience the kind of resilience, patience, and intuition fishing requires. They knew the limitations of their bodies and the potential dangers those limitations posed.

And so maybe, just maybe, to answer my earlier question of "Why in the world would you just go??" is because when Jesus called these tried-and-true fishermen to follow him, "they understood the call not as a directive to leave their experience and intelligence behind, but to bring the best of their core selves forward — to become even more fully and freely themselves." (*Debie Thomas*)

Now to follow Jesus as becoming even more fully and freely yourself is a call I would respond to... it is a road less traveled by that I might risk taking...and it's a call I would not mind sharing with others, not as a way to "save" them from some kind of eternal hell, but because it is resurrection, it is life and life abundant. I might just drop my nets if I heard that kind of call to follow, knowing that there is always grace upon grace, even in my limitations.

Because we cannot forget that all of those disciples that drop everything to follow will also have periods of doubt, they will make many mistakes, and with everything they know about the one who calls them into wholeness, they will end up abandoning him, claiming they do not know him, huddled up in a room in fear. But

the story does not end there. They will also be the ones who receive the Spirit, who tell his story and share it to the world. They are the ones who are called, my friends.

We are also being called again to follow this day. Because as we travel the faith journey, we know that the call comes again and again. We will continue to come to paths that diverge in a wood and wonder which way to go. It is a decision that we make continually as we grow and follow in Christ's footsteps.

And so, today, are we confident enough in who we are to say "Here I am"? Will you follow? Will you dare to take the road less traveled by?

Because it's true that you might have a boat you have to leave behind to travel this path. You might have to walk in paths that are unfamiliar and new or have not been tread upon yet. But if we can trust God with who we are, trust God with the gifts we have so that they might be expanded for the wholeness, love, justice and mercy of all of God's people, the things we let go or leave behind might be returned to us anew, enlivened in ways we could not have grasped or imagined. What will you choose to do next when you hear the call?

As Jesus walked by the sea, he saw Peter and Andrew, James and John, Bob and Alice, Tab, Donald, Nancy and Matt, he saw Zoey and Amaya, Miles and Steve, Boman, Wayne, and Nina, Kelsey and Judy and Brad-he saw them...he sees all of us. "Follow me," he says, "and I will make you fish for people."

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

*("The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost)*

Amen.