

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
February 16, 2025
Luke 5:1-11

“When God Calls”

A fisherman pushes his boat out onto the water before dawn, just as he has done every day for years. He knows the rhythm of the waves, the pull of the nets, and the patience required for the catch. His life is familiar . . . steady, predictable. But then, one day, everything changes. A teacher steps into his boat, tells him to cast his nets once more, and suddenly, the ordinary becomes extraordinary. In that moment, he is called—not just from his boat, but to something entirely new.

Peter didn’t wake up that morning expecting his life to change. He wasn’t looking for a new calling. But when Jesus spoke, he had a choice: stay with what he knew or step forward into the unknown.

The story of Christianity begins when Jesus calls people to set out on a journey and take the unfamiliar route -- and some of them do. Now I realize that we don’t often think of Christianity starting like that but think about it; in order for any movement to gain traction, it must have followers. And often times the early followers sign up when the movement is in its infancy with no guarantee of going anywhere.

This was the case when Peter signed on to follow Jesus. Maybe he’d heard of Jesus prior to this, but maybe he hadn’t. We really don’t know. All we know is that after a long night of fishing and nothing to show for it, Jesus got into Peter’s boat, told him to head to deep water, and put down his nets for a catch. And Peter, after protesting that he’d already tried that but what the heck, he would try it again, caught so many fish he needed to call for reinforcement.

Now, one could argue that after a miracle like that it would be stupid of Peter NOT to follow Jesus. But one could also argue that after catching so many fish, Peter took a real risk to walk away from what was finally a profitable livelihood.

Like Peter, most of us have at least once in our lives, left the secure life behind. We've gone off to college, or moved across the country for a new job, or left the old life behind for a new one. I've only done it three times in my life: the first time was when I left home for a college 500 miles away where I didn't know a soul. But I was 18 and eager to get out of Ohio. The second time was harder; when Terry and I left Wisconsin for St. Louis we were leaving behind friends and a home we loved and that time I had two very young children who were 2 years old and 2 months old. The stakes were higher; the move was more difficult than when I was 18. The third time was in 2018, when I moved here. I left a home and friends and family after putting down roots for 18 years; I uprooted children who had never known another home; and I left a church for no apparent reason other than the most important reason – that God was calling me to you. It's hard to explain to people that sometimes Jesus' call shows up unexpectedly. Jesus didn't show up for Peter after he had a good night's sleep and a hearty breakfast; he called those men at the end of a long working day and then told them to keep on working.

Following God's call doesn't always come, usually doesn't come in expected ways or at expected times. It's not often predictable or routine.

Truth be told, I'm rather averse to the whole idea of picking up and leaving the secure life behind. It's just not in my DNA. Except for time away from home in college and seminary, I lived in the same house my whole life until I got married. My childhood was about as secure as secure can get.

So when I think of Peter and Andrew and James and John leaving everything behind to follow Jesus's call, I am in awe.

I'd love to know what was going on in their hearts and minds and lives that they could just drop everything to follow God's, and Christ's call. I'd love to know if they were frustrated or bored or unhappy or restless. I'd love to know if they knew something about Jesus when he came along and told them to "Follow me." I'd like to know these things because it would help to explain the story, and it would provide some rationalization as to why they did what they did.

But we don't get any back story or reason or rationalization, we only get a "do not be afraid". And they left everything behind and followed him."

Now, I realize that for most of us life is a little more complicated than that. At 18, I could drop everything and follow. At 29, it was more difficult. At 47, it was even more difficult. I have a lot of nets in my life, and I can't drop them that easily.

I'm also the type of person, when faced with a difficult decision, to list the pros and cons. If I do this, then it will have this consequence and if I do that it will have that consequence. Maybe some of you do the same thing.

But you know what? Sometimes you have to leave the shoreline. You can't get to where Jesus calls by staying on the beach.

Which is scary. It's scary to think about leaving everything behind because we like what is familiar. Familiar is good. It makes us feel safe and safe is good. Christian spirituality has a name for this feeling, it's called attachment.

But it's not necessarily a good attachment. The word used here comes from old European roots meaning "staked" or "nailed to".

Which means that, theologically speaking, what makes us feel safe may also place us in peril spiritually. We hold ourselves back from what God intends for our lives. We choose to stay on the shore, attached to what is familiar and secure, even when Christ tells us "don't be afraid." (*Christian Century Magazine, January 11, 2005*).

You see, God calls us even when we don't have all the facts nailed down. God calls us to leave our secure lives and follow, even though we have a whole host of insecurities about doing that. God calls us to follow, to step out of our comfort zones, and to have faith.

The Bible says faith is hearing the voice of God, the call of Christ, and following. It's what Sarah and Abraham did, and Moses, and Paul, and

Mary and Joseph, and Ruth and Naomi, and all the disciples. They stepped out in faith because they heard God calling them.

I realize that's not usually how we define faith. Many people think that faith is a noun-that it's something to be entirely understood and grasped, not something lived and lived into. Usually, we define faith as a set of beliefs that we must subscribe to, because that's secure. It's rational. We can grasp that.

Presbyterians, especially, are good at the intellectual side of faith. We believe that no knowledge is off-limits. There isn't much we don't know for certain, or don't think we'll eventually discover. But the hard truth this story teaches us is that the journey begins without knowing all the facts. The hard truth of the story is that we set off on this journey because there's something compelling about Jesus that we cannot yet organize intellectually. (*Michael Lindvall, "A Geography of God", page 16.*)

Anselm, a renowned theologian of the medieval age, coined the term "faith seeking understanding." It implies that one trusts before having all the facts. It means that something in your heart has stirred you to begin on this journey, something that you cannot grasp intellectually. So you begin your journey trusting. And when you hit the road on that journey, you don't have all the facts. Even if you have a map and have had your mechanic give your car a good look over, you still don't have all the facts. There is always road construction. Jesus' disciples hit the road without all the facts. No new member classes, no orientation sessions, no discussion even as to where they were going. They just went.

The past couple of weeks I've been planning a special trip for my daughters, Charlotte and Julia. Julia graduates from college in May, and she and Charlotte have been wanting to drive west and explore some of the national parks ever since their grandmother, my Mom (named Julia) told them about the road trip she and her sister (named Charlotte) took in 1950 – 75 years ago!! --from Akron, Ohio to Seattle, Washington. My Mom was 19, my Aunt Charlotte was 21. This was before the interstate road system or cell phones. My Mom said when her Mom would call them, the operator in Akron would have to patch her through to the operator in Chicago, who

would then patch her through to wherever they were staying that night. She also said before they left, they learned how to change a tire, and they carried a billy club in the backseat “just in case.” To which my Charlotte asked, “What’s a billy club?”

The night before my Mom and Aunt Charlotte were due to leave, their Mom told them they couldn’t go. To which they said, like any 19- and 21-year-old would, “We’re going.”

When I told my Mom that Julia and Charlotte were planning the big “Julia and Charlotte 2.0” trip, my Mom said – just like her Mom – no; you can’t let them go. “It’s not safe,” she said. And she’s not wrong. It probably isn’t as safe as it was in 1950. But they do have cell phones with GPS, YouTube to teach them how to change a tire, and thanks to President Eisenhower, the interstate road system.

Now, do I worry about Charlotte and Julia driving west? You bet. And as I’ve mapped the trip and made reservations, I’ve made them with an eye for safety. I’ve reserved a solid car, and it helps that the first 3 nights they’ll stay with family.

I also need to trust. Trust that people are kinder than we give them credit for, and trust that they’ll use common sense. Is it possible I’ll say to them the night before they leave, just like my grandmother did to her Julia and Charlotte 75 years ago, “You can’t go.” Possibly. And will they tell me the same thing my Aunt and Mom did to their Mom? Absolutely! And I will worry, but at least this go around I call them without the aide of an operator, and even locate their exact coordinates thanks to an app on my phone.

Trust and belief. Both are needed. And usually trust walks a few steps ahead of belief.

Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest and author, wrote a memoir titled “Leaving Church.” In that memoir she wrote that she finally arrived at the understanding that faith has more to do with trust than certainty. She wrote:

I trusted God to be God even if I could not say who God was for sure. I trusted God to sustain the world although I could not say for sure how that happened. I trusted God to hold me and those I loved, in life and in death, without giving me one shred of conclusive evidence.

The truth of this story is that most of what you may come to understand about God can only be understood by following God, and God's call doesn't always come, usually doesn't come, when or in ways we expect it to. It's not often predictable or routine. Sometimes the head needs to give way to the heart. And sometimes, just like the disciples, we need to be willing to leave the shoreline and follow.

And so, as we reflect on what it means to trust God's call, even when the destination is uncertain, we turn our hearts to one among us who is living this very truth.

Brent Neuenschwander, our gifted Director of Music Ministries and Organist, has heard God's call—not with a clear roadmap ahead, but with a deep sense that he is being led toward something new. Like Peter stepping out of the boat, Brent is stepping forward in faith, even as the future remains unwritten.

We give thanks for the years of beautiful music he has shared with us, for the ways he has lifted our spirits and deepened our worship through his talent and dedication. We will miss him dearly, but we also send him forth with our prayers, our love, and our blessing.

Brent, wherever God leads you next, know that you go with our gratitude and our deepest appreciation. You will always be a part of this church family. May God bless you and keep you, may God's face shine upon you, and may you always hear the music of God's grace guiding your way.

Godspeed, my friend.

Amen.

