

Rev. Dr. Anne B. Epling  
First Presbyterian Church  
February 1, 2026  
Matthew 4:12–23

### **“A Challenging Call”**

I've preached on this story many times before, but I was always so busy concentrating on the fact that the disciples immediately dropped everything and left their father behind . . . that I never noticed the time stamp, the detail at the very beginning of our scripture. Which is this: this whole scene takes place on the heels of John the Baptist being arrested. This intrigues me because it means that the disciples follow Jesus, a man they've never met before, even when they knew that it could be a dangerous enterprise. Herod Antipas, one of the sons of Herod the great, and a Roman client king governing Galilee and Perea has John the Baptist imprisoned. This is how our story opens.

Which means the disciples aren't called in a vacuum, devoid of time or circumstances; they're called in the midst of something very concrete and, quite frankly, dangerous.

Which means that when Jesus calls Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John, they already know it could be dangerous to follow. Following Jesus was not a neutral or safe decision for them. And that bears repeating in times like these.:

***Following Jesus was not a neutral or safe decision.***

I've shared with you before that many years ago, after a particularly challenging sermon, I received a letter from someone taking issue with my sermon and saying in her letter: “In my mind a church is a place of refuge from all that is wrong in the world, a place where people go to be comforted and inspired in faith.” And while the church ***is sometimes*** called to be that; it's not only that. Friends, if the church can't find the moral courage and conviction to be a voice of right and wrong, what are we doing? Following

Jesus is not a safe or neutral decision. There are demands placed upon us. Are we not to say a word about what we see, or name a wrong when we see it? Are we not to do that for fear of it “being too political”. Saying that everyone should be treated with decency isn’t a political statement; it’s a Christian statement; a statement of faith. This isn’t about politics; it’s about our call to treat people with decency. It’s about our call to embody Jesus’ way in what we say and do. In today’s gospel reading, Jesus commands the disciples to “repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This means we are called to turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world. But repentance isn’t a one and done action. Not just merely a verbal consent. It’s a change of heart and mind. When we repent we are embodying God’s reign in the world through our actions.

And that brings us to the world we are actually living in this week. Because Scripture does not stay safely in the past, and neither can the Church.

It’s a faithful statement to say the killing of Alex Pretti is a terrible tragedy. I hope we can all agree on that. No matter how you may feel about ICE, protestors, or protestors carrying guns, what happened is terrible. Is this who we want to be? Alex Pretti’s killing has stirred important questions about power and human dignity in our nation’s conscience. But such questions are not new. Our story opens with the arrest of John the Baptist by Herod, reminding us that when those in power feel threatened, fear hardens, force is used, and human lives are treated as expendable. Scripture does not sanitize that truth.

It may be a different century with different rulers, But it’s the Same reality. the call of Jesus is not a call into safety but into truth and risk. When the powers of this world rely on violence or fear to control, human life is devalued. And Scripture refuses to look away from that reality.

And it is precisely *into territory like this* — where fear, violence, and injustice loom — that Jesus issues his call. Not after things settle down. Not once the danger has passed. But *right then*. Knowing what happened to John. Knowing

what kind of world this is. Jesus called Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John anyway — and they followed.

What Jesus does next is striking. He does not begin with a strategy or a speech. He begins by calling people—ordinary people—to decide who they will follow.

They put their hands in Jesus's hand and followed him into the world; the messy, violent, not as it should be world. and they had no idea where Jesus was going to lead them.

So they had to trust Jesus to faithfully lead them from what was known and comfortable into what was unknown and perhaps uncomfortable. Like the disciples, we're not called to sit at Jesus's feet, but to literally follow in his footsteps, to be his hands, feet and heart in the world. Aren't we still called to do the same?

Friends, the Church is more than a place to seek refuge from the world. I believe the church is a part of the world, and as such there are times when the Church is called to comfort, but it's also called to console, condemn, critique, celebrate, and confess. We cannot isolate ourselves from what is happening in the world any more than Jesus did. I believe Jesus called us to be a part of the world and to build God's kingdom here. John Calvin once said that while our faith is personal, it is never private. What we believe about God may be personal, but how we live as God's children is anything but private. Taking this a step further, we are called to engage the world, and to help make the world a better place because God loves the world and cares about what happens to it.

And so they went into the world, following Jesus and his ways, leaving behind their possessions, their jobs and even their family.

Why does Jesus ask the disciples to leave everything behind? because they symbolized a life they had to let go of. Their boat symbolized their investment in the prevailing economic order. And even their poor father, as one commentator said, symbolized a patriarchal power structure that they were to

let go of in order to practice a more excellent way of relating to other human beings and to God. In leaving their past, The disciples are choosing a new and better future aligned with Jesus rather than Herod. He asks them to leave it all behind because following him requires clarity—about what will shape your life, and what you will no longer let define you.

I've been thinking about that kind of clarity this week—not in theory, but in practice.

Some of you know that I spent three days last week with my sister and my brother cleaning out my parents' home because it is time to get it ready to sell. Talk about the need to let go! I know some of you have also gone through this process, so you can relate. My sister and I decided that we would start on the second floor of the house; it seemed a little easier than starting in the kitchen and pantry with all of the household goods, which were numerous. Now my siblings and I had already gone through the house and taken what we wanted so the house was pretty free of furniture but there was still a massive amount of household goods to sort through. In preparation for this, the past few weeks I have gone through my own house to sort and declutter because I needed space to store some of the things that I brought home from my parents' house last October. So I had mentally prepared myself for this occasion and knew heading into it that I had a very limited amount of space to take anything else with me. My sister felt the same way. This meant that as we went through everything, we knew that a lot of it, unfortunately, would be left behind. So we started boxing up and piling things in rooms for pick up. And on Thursday two guys spent 9 hours each loading up trucks. As I drove away to come home and even woke up the next morning, I felt a decent amount of guilt for having to leave my mom's stuff behind; I know she loved and used it (she entertained a lot), and would have wanted us to take it; and we did take some. But friends, I had to leave it behind. one thing I've learned through enough decluttering that leaving something behind does not mean I am leaving behind my memories. Also, I knew that my mom loved her stuff and enjoyed her stuff and that was

the purpose of it. I would not use all of it all of it and I certainly would not enjoy a cluttered house if I had taken it all.

Love is not stored in china cabinets or linen closets. Those things served their purpose—and their purpose was joy, hospitality, and life. While sorting I was reminded of what the de-clutter expert Marie Kondo wrote about sorting memorabilia or keepsakes That struck me as deeply theological.

“It’s not our memories but the person we have become because of those past experiences that we should treasure. The space in which we live should be for the person we are becoming now, not for the person we were in the past.”

I reflected on that in light of today’s story and the challenging call the disciples accepted. The disciples had to let go of everything; because it kept them tied to who they were. And Jesus was calling them to be someone new.

Following Jesus requires clarity—about what will shape your life, and what you will no longer let define you. So, what will you let define you? Will it be Jesus, and his ways – or the way of Herod?

But here’s the good news: for most of us, discipleship is not one dramatic moment where we drop everything and walk away. More often, it unfolds slowly—closet by closet, decision by decision. NOT as a 4400 square foot house in 3 days.

Because God meets us in the details of our lives.

If you feel helpless, wondering what you can do to make a difference, remember this simple advice

Love spreads word by word.

Wrongs are righted one by one.

Faithfulness accumulates slowly, like a bucket filling drop by drop.

Fred Craddock once put it this way:

““We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking a \$1000 bill and laying it on the table. Here’s my life, Lord. I’m giving it all. But the reality for most of us is

that he sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1000 for quarters. We go through life putting 25 cents here and 50 cents there.”

Before I left my parents’ house, there were a few things I did take with me. Not furniture. Not dishes.

I took a small stack of letters my parents had written to one another when they were dating in 1952.

One in particular made me laugh out loud. It was a letter my dad wrote to his soon-to-be mother-in-law, offering his thoughts about the wedding. Earnestly, he suggested that instead of a large wedding in Akron, maybe there could be a smaller one at Fort Sill, where he was stationed in ROTC—since his own parents wouldn’t be back from geological work in India in time.

Knowing my grandmother, the plans were already set. There would be a large, elegant wedding in Akron, carefully arranged around everyone’s schedule—not a small ceremony at Fort Sill.

But I love that letter. I love how innocent and hopeful my dad was—how he thought his voice mattered, how he trusted he was being welcomed into something bigger than himself.

I didn’t take those letters because I need to reread them every day. I took them because they carry forward what mattered then and still matters now: love, commitment, and the courage to step into a future you cannot fully control.

And that’s what I imagine the disciples carrying with them when they followed Jesus—not boats or nets or certainty, but trust.

This morning we heard Psalm 27. I won’t go into the psalm in detail, but I will say this: the psalmist dares to assert that God can be trusted—that God will not fail, even when everything else does. This is not naïve optimism. It is faith spoken in the presence of tragedy.

Friends, let this faith steady your spirit and give you just enough strength for today. Remember: you are people of good news. God was with us yesterday, God is with us today, and God will be with us tomorrow—no matter what the news or your Facebook feed tells you.

“The Lord is my light and my salvation,” the psalmist proclaims. “Whom shall I fear?” God is my life—therefore I will not be afraid.

So remember the good news. The world is in God’s hands. God is sovereign. And we do not make this journey alone. The same Jesus who called those fishermen still walks with us, still holds our hand, still leads us forward—into truth, into courage, and into life—one faithful step at a time.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.