

## ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE JORDAN

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Isaiah 9:1-4; Matthew 4:12-23

For all of Matthew's details of Jesus' birth, the events that surround it, the magi, the murder of the innocents, the exile in Egypt, his gospel only starts in earnest when Jesus is baptized in the Jordan. It is a watershed moment in Matthew's gospel.

When Jesus is baptized, like the water-crossing of Israel passing through the Red Sea, then wandering forty years in the wilderness, Jesus crosses the Jordan, and lives in the desert for forty days, arriving at last, if not in the Promised Land, at least in Galilee where he made his home in what Matthew describes as "Capernaum, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, on the road by the sea, *across the Jordan*, Galilee of the Gentiles." Matthew lingers over the details of this location as if he were savoring a good wine. Because it is crossing the Jordan that is the quintessential moment for Jesus. From that point on, there is no turning back and he will never be the same, nor will anyone who is a part of his life.

In a sense Matthew's account, were it a novel and not a gospel, might be properly titled, "After the Jordan." Because this is the story of what it is like to live after baptism for him. It is to encounter the world alive with God, in whom Jesus lives and moves and has his being.

The first indication that we get that something new is happening on the other side of the Jordan occurs in the call of the first four of the disciples. And its entrée is heralded when Jesus begins to preach a message of repentance. "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near." The words are familiar, because it is the same message that John has delivered in the wilderness, the same words that he spoke breathing fire and brimstone, but somehow now on the lips of Jesus they more inviting.

It's not just that John is more gruff, more haggard in his leather loincloth and hair shirt looking a bit like Rubeus Hagrid, the gamekeeper in the Harry Potter series, or that by comparison Jesus seems more kindly and approachable. No, it's something more.

While the message is the same, the messenger is not and the difference is that in Jesus the kingdom of heaven has dawned. Tom Long, of Emory University, has described it this way,

When John said the kingdom had come near, it was like a person pointing to a rain cloud on the horizon and saying that refreshing showers would come soon. When Jesus says the kingdom had drawn near, it means that the hoped-for kingdom was beginning to happen in and through him. In the inauguration of his ministry... the cloudburst of the kingdom has begun.<sup>1</sup>

So there he is, this one whose call is to repentance, and whose announcement is that the kingdom of heaven has come near. He walks along that road by the Sea of Galilee and comes upon two fishermen Simon Peter and Andrew his brother. "Follow me," he says to them in a singular imperative invitation. And because he is now on the

far side of the Jordan, where such things happen, they immediately drop their nets and follow him. A little later, continuing down the shoreline, Jesus spies two more fishermen, two brothers, the sons of Zebedee, James and John. He bids them follow, and *immediately* they left their father and their boat and followed him.

Later in the gospel the disciples remind Jesus of this sacrifice when Peter says, “Lord we have left everything and followed you.” To which Jesus says, Peter “...everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters, or father or mother or children or fields, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life.”

Of course, we want to know all the details on the relationship between these fishermen and Jesus. Did they know each other before? Had Jesus been teaching an after-work Bible study at his house once a week? Was he guest rabbi from time to time in the synagogue in Capernaum? How is it that these men left house and home and family and income and threw down their nets and followed Jesus, in response to this one imperative invitation?

And what about poor old Zebedee, James and John’s father, proprietor of *Zebedee and Sons, Fresh Fish for Sale*? What about his dreams? What about his retirement? His whole family business sunk on the sudden departure of his two impulsive boys. Maybe the signal is that on the far side of the Jordan even family relationships change, and the old order gives way to the new.

It’s anybody’s guess as to why they dropped everything the way they did, because Matthew gives us no help at all. Not a single word of psychological explanation, no indication of emotional balance or imbalance on the part of the four, no second thoughts suggested, or hesitation. All we know is that at Jesus’ invitation, Peter and Andrew and James and John follow.

Tim O’Brien has written a wonderful Viet Nam story with the intriguing title, *The Things They Carried*. And I suppose there might be a novel possible on the four first disciples called at Jesus’ beckoning, entitled, *The Things They Left Behind*. But surely there was much that might have held these fellows back, had they given it any thought. Family, brothers sisters, houses, fields, work.

One thing is for sure. They had no idea where the road would take them if they followed him. The last place they might have imagined was precisely the place where he did go, across the lonely roads of Galilee, teaching, preaching, healing, confronting the scribes and Pharisees, gathering crowds, feeding the multitudes, eventually riding into Jerusalem and taking his roadshow into the courts of the temple, overthrowing the tables of the money changers, and chasing out the two bit pigeon sellers with a whip of chords. And at the last he was snapped in the trap of the ruling powers, taken one night from the garden, held captive in the Praetorium, dragged off to a lonely hill, and executed on a shameful cross like some despicable thief.

The Marines these days have an ad campaign that says, “We’re not taking applications... only commitments.” And perhaps that’s the point of the story of their call, these four. If they had thought about it, read all the fine print, realized what he would say and do, the bravery that he would coax from them, the traveling they would endure, they might not have signed on so readily. But as it was, they followed him *immediately*.

There is a lot of talk in evangelical circles about finding Jesus, about seeking after him and taking him as Lord and savior as if he could be our captive somehow, as if it were him who had been lost all this long while and not us. “I’ve found it!” the bumper stickers used to say.

But that is to misstate the issue altogether. St. Augustine put it simply in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, “I could not seek you,” he wrote, “if you had not already found me.”<sup>2</sup> Strictly speaking this discipleship to which Jesus invites us is not about us or our agendas, not about making us happier, nor more fulfilled, nor more successful, nor becoming more wealthy, nor finding our best self now, nor any of that other nonsense that dresses up like Christianity but is instead self serving motivational psychology.

It is God who chooses us, God who finds us, God who knows us through and through and loves us still and all. It is not about whether we will decide to know and love God, but recognizing that God has always known and always loved us and we have just come to discover it.

Of course that is the wonder of things, this side of the Jordan, that God is as gracious as God is. And that we, just as we are, are enough already, we are sufficient. Even as Peter and Andrew and James and John were precisely the ones whom Jesus needed and, so, invited to follow him.

If I were to start a world religion, I think I would try to get some stars won over to my cause, influential religious leaders perhaps, or well known celebrities like Tom Cruise, maybe. I would find the strongest voices, the clearest minds, the most respected names to convert and be my adherents. But that would be my way and not God’s way.

Jesus, chooses common fisher folk, laborers, average people, not rabbis, not wealthy or influential people of means necessarily, just Peter, Andrew, James, and John. And you know something? It was enough. They were enough. Precisely because as they were they were the ones whom Jesus needed.

At the 62<sup>nd</sup> Street entrance to the campus of Fordham University near Lincoln Center, there is a garden area known as St. Peter’s Garden. In the center, stands a bronze statue 28 feet high, designed by the sculptor Frederick Shrady. The figure is impressionistic and expresses a man, St. Peter, with his arm reached outward and skyward casting a net, a net that looks almost like tree branches they are so spiny and separate. What’s particularly remarkable about the hand of St. Peter is the way Shrady has sculpted it so that one cannot tell where the hand ends and the net begins. And isn’t that interesting?

My colleague and friend Bob Dunham pastor of the University Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill says,

There are so many ways in which who we are and what we do are so tightly bound together, ways in which our own hands are indistinguishable from the nets we employ, or the surgical instruments we use, or the children’s hands we hold, or the books we teach or balance, or whatever the tools of our trade. Often *if* we study the details of our lives closely enough, we will discover a seamlessness between who we are and what

we do. There is an assumption that the same will be true of our discipleship.

In our modern lives, with workaholism the way it is, we most of us spend too much time working. Our identity is too wrapped up in our work. And while the old adage about no one's tombstone ever has the inscription, "I should have spent more time at the office," there is an important element of who we are that is tied to what work we do in life. And there is a price to be paid when the two are in conflict, who we are, and what we do.

We are, of course, much more than our profession or our work. We are human beings, vulnerable, and on a journey; strong sometimes and weak at others. We are not only doctors or ministers or accountants or stock brokers or ad agents or lawyers or teachers. We are more than that. Maybe the closest we ever get to who we are is who we are when we retire, when our professional work is done. But to wait until then to get to the essence of one's self is to wait too long.

Jesus calls Peter and Andrew and James and John as fishermen, and they will fish for others from that time on. Their working experience will not help them much with the fine points of theology, or the debates they will have with the scribes and Pharisees about Torah and its interpretation. It will not equip them for their contacts with the wealthy and cultured with whom they will meet, but that will not matter. For who they are and all that they are is valued by Jesus, deployed by him on the far side of the Jordan, where even fishermen can be apostles and unexpected people like you and me for all our failings can become disciples. The credentials they will bear after all will not be theirs, but his, the ones he confers upon them, as they leave their nets and follow him.

It's strange how on this side of the Jordan, where the kingdom is dawning, when Jesus bids the first four disciples to follow, they leave everything behind and do so. I wonder what it was they saw in him and heard in his invitation that made them leave everything else behind?

Fred Craddock, now retired from teaching preaching, suggests what that is.

Glenn Adsit, a schoolmate from years ago, ministered mostly in China. He was under house arrest in China when the soldiers came one day and said, "You can return to America."

They were celebrating, and the soldiers said, "You can take two hundred pounds with you."

Well, they'd been there for years, Two hundred pounds. They got the scales and started family arguments, two children, wife and husband. Must have this vase. Well, this is a new typewriter. What about my books? What about this? And they weighed everything and took it off and weighed this, and finally, right on the dot, two hundred pounds.

The soldier asked, "Ready to go?"

"Yes."

"Did you weigh everything?"

"Yes."

"You weighed the kids?"

“No, we didn’t.”  
“Weigh the kids.”

And in a moment, typewriter, and vase and all became trash. Trash. It happens.<sup>3</sup>

I don’t know what it is that you hold most dear in life. What it is that you have weighed and hope to take with you. The things that mark the saving, or collecting, or keeping, or achieving of a lifetime, whatever it is that we use to convince ourselves that we can’t drop everything and follow him right now. I don’t know what those are for you.

And I have no idea what might have crossed the minds of Peter and Andrew and James and John the day that that lanky Nazorean came walking by and bid them follow. I only know they had the wit and wisdom to pay attention, and the faithfulness to stick with it.

I wonder sometimes if he were to call us, as he did them, as he does today, whether we will follow? Will you follow?

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas J. Long, *Matthew: Westminster Bible Companion*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997. 41.

<sup>2</sup> Confessions, Book I.

<sup>3</sup> Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories*. Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward, eds. St. Louis, Chalice Press, 2001. 22-23.