

January 26, Epiphany 3A (Matthew 4:12–23)

## **Jesus' call is less about what we leave behind than our eager response to follow him as everyday people.**

by [Jennifer Moland-Kovash](#) in the [January 15, 2020](#) issue

My fishing adventures in recent years have been relegated to twice-yearly possibilities when visiting family in northern Minnesota: once when the lakes are frozen and we shiver in shelters on the ice, and once in the summer when we're more concerned about sunburns than we are about catching our supper.

During these warm-weather outings when my son was younger, my dad would maneuver the boat to a theoretically good spot, and my role in the whole operation was to bait my son's hook, repeatedly. This involved not only retrieving the worms from the bait box but also dividing them into smaller pieces. It was often less of a fishing expedition than a fish feeding outing, as the small sunfish often nibbled away the worms before we could hook them. In my attempt to stretch the bait, I divided the worms with my fingernails. Sadly, all of my dissecting was in vain: the largest fish we caught on a particular outing—the only keeper—was snagged using a piece of leftover deli turkey from our sandwiches. We all knew that, thankfully, eating dinner that night—let alone any livelihood—wasn't dependent on what we caught that afternoon.

These early fisher folks that we read about Jesus calling, though, are in a family business—not a family pastime. Simon Peter and Andrew, the first set of brothers we encounter, aren't with their father, or at least he's not mentioned, but we can imagine that they are fishermen because their father was before them and his father before him and so on. They rely on the fish they catch not only for food on the table but also for trade in the marketplace and money in the purse. They are fishermen, working the nets, in the same way that we're pastors or teachers or project managers or account executives. Fishing is what they do, day in and day out.

Zebedee's sons James and John, also fishermen, are mending the nets with their father when Jesus calls them to follow him. Our narrator reports that they immediately leave the boat—and their father—and follow Jesus. The conversation between the parents that night was likely one for the ages. *What do you mean, the boys aren't coming home? They've followed that wandering rabbi, the one whose cousin is in jail? You're pulling my leg, right Z?* Is it disbelief? Shock? Outrage? What is the reaction of these parents whose children have left everything on the shore?

But what I love is how Jesus calls these brothers to follow him. He doesn't say he's going to make them teachers or rabbis. He doesn't say that they'll be preachers or evangelists or baptizers. He says, *Come follow me and you will do the same thing you've been doing for generations: fishing. Except now you'll be fishers of people.* He speaks to them in a language they'll understand and gives them a job they can do. They know how to fish.

It's true that a lot of the images used in scripture don't always connect with a modern reader. Shepherding and fishing might not be among our everyday professions, and if they are, they have changed radically since Andrew and Peter and the Sons of Thunder stood on the lakeshore. Even if we're familiar with an agrarian life, the Bible's agricultural images are quite different from what we know today. Yet the call that Jesus casts over the waters of today is the same as the one that those first disciples heard.

One of the dangers of using call language to talk about being a disciple of Jesus can be that it seems to be owned by clergy and religious leaders. Church leaders talk about our call story because we're taught and coached to do so throughout our training. Talking about our call to ministry becomes comfortable in ways that perhaps are not as familiar to others—it's the language we speak. So for many, hearing Jesus call you to discipleship can feel like an invitation to this profession that is remarkably *other*. When these first four were invited to fish for people, they dropped their nets and left their boats behind. Does it have to be that radical? Do we have to leave our livelihood behind to follow Jesus? Do we have to walk away from everything we know?

Certainly the call to discipleship is not exclusively (or even primarily) a call to professional ministry. The life of discipleship is one for all people, ordinary folks serving and following Jesus in the midst of our lives as project managers, teachers, cashiers, at-home dads, pastors. Being a disciple means seeing Jesus as the light of

the world that scatters the shadows. It means striving to be unified in the gospel, as a community of faith—unified not by the many things that could divide us but by God’s good news for the world and for us. Ordinary, everyday people—some with worm guts under our fingernails—walking along the lakeshore, accompanying those in need, and traveling to bring good news to our neighbors near and far.

It is possible, of course, that we might have a boat we need to leave behind, a metaphorical anchor in our lives. But Jesus’ call seems to be less about what we leave behind and more about our eager response to follow him as everyday people—a call that continues to come today, whatever our lakeshore looks like.