

What about Zebedee?: Matthew 4:12-23

by [Mark Ralls](#) in the [Jan 11, 2005](#) issue

When fairy tales begin with the familiar phrase “Once upon a time,” they signal a mythical point of departure: the beginning of a great adventure. If Matthew had known this phrase, he might have employed it to introduce the calling of the first disciples, since his version of this story begins with the breathless anticipation of a fairy tale.

Each day Andrew and Simon, James and John wake before dawn, walk down to the sea, unroll their fishing nets and try their luck. This was their routine. Yet when Jesus calls, their lives are changed in an instant. “Follow me,” Jesus says, “and I will make you fishers of people.” With a few words they are his. Then Jesus sets his sights on James and John, and they leave their boat, and everything that goes with it, behind them. In the blink of an eye, they are by Jesus’ side, wide-eyed and dripping wet from the Sea of Galilee. G. K. Chesterton may have had such moments in mind when he wrote, “An adventure is, by its nature, a thing that comes to us. It is thing that chooses us, not a thing that we choose.” Perhaps this is why everything happens so fast in this passage. No one can wait for the adventure to begin.

Well . . . almost no one. Every time I read this story, I find myself drawn to its only minor character. He appears just before the curtain falls. Informing us that James and John were fishing that day with their father, Zebedee, Matthew leaves us with one final backward glance: “Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed [Jesus].” Though I know it is not what this passage is supposed to be about, I can’t help wondering why Zebedee didn’t come along. Was it simply because he wasn’t invited? Maybe. But I am enough of a Wesleyan to believe that *everyone* is invited. Each of us has the opportunity to respond to God’s grace in his or her own way. If that is true, Zebedee stands out in this passage as the one who does not respond. While four spring to their feet, one hesitates. Four drop their nets. One isn’t quite ready to let go.

I am not saying this to beat up on poor old Zebedee. It's not about trying to make him look bad next to his sons—those two poster boys of Christian enthusiasm. I find myself wondering about Zebedee because out of all the characters in this story, he is the one I most relate to. I too have been known to sit in the boat awhile and mull things over. It took me two and a half years of college to declare a major, four years of dating to ask my wife to marry me. As Zebedee reminds me, most days our lives just don't measure up to the phrase, "Once upon a time." Some days we're just bored commuters stalled in traffic or distracted shoppers going in circles at the mall. We're not always ready for adventure. Perhaps, at those times, we're still following Jesus, but we are also dragging our feet. In this sense, Zebedee is for me a cautionary figure—a reminder that I can't stay in the boat my whole life and still find myself in the place where Jesus is going. I must follow.

When Christ calls, he offers abundant life. If we are to accept his offer, we must also accept some measure of risk. James Baldwin wrote, "Any real change implies the break-up of the world as one has always known it . . . the end of safety." Spiritual growth implies change. And change suggests risk. Yet, for folks like me, change is hard. We cling to the familiar. We clutch those behaviors and beliefs that make us feel safe. Christian spirituality calls this "attachment." The word comes from old European roots meaning "staked" or "nailed to." It implies that what makes us feel safe may also place us spiritually in peril. Our souls remain tethered to something other than the love of God. We hold ourselves back from what we were meant to become. We choose to stay in the boat, attached to all that is familiar and secure, even when the Son of God appears on the shore.

Of course, we don't know what happened to Zebedee—how he may have responded the next time Jesus called. We do know that despite their initial enthusiasm Peter, James and John were far from perfect followers. When the chips were down, Peter denied Christ. James and John missed the point of Jesus' teaching, longing for the security of their own advancement. Christ calls countless times during our lives. Sometimes we are up to the task; other times we're not. However we have responded in the past, the adventure is never complete.

In his novel *Empire Falls*, Richard Russo speculates that Jesus' disciples must have experienced some ambivalence after his death. "They never wanted him crucified of course but what a relief it must have been when the stone was rolled across the entrance of the tomb, sealing everything shut so they could go back to being fishermen which they knew how to do rather than fishers of men which they didn't."

The resurrection was yet another disruption, yet another invitation.

When Christ calls, he beckons us beyond the point of familiarity, asking us to risk doing something we don't know how to do, to become someone we're not yet sure we know how to be. It's not just that we are taking a risk on Christ. Each and every time he calls, he is taking a risk on us.