

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

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January 22, 2023

III Epiphany, Matthew 4:12-23

They case their nets in Galilee, just off the hills of brown;
such happy, simple fisher folk before the Lord came down.ⁱ

In the name of God, *Amen*.

Following Jesus' baptism and immediately before our Gospel lesson begins, the Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness.ⁱⁱ You may recall of those events, Jesus fasts forty days and forty nights when "the tempter" comes and offers him great power and even greater glory.ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus resists these temptations until "the devil [leaves] him suddenly and the angels [come and wait] on him."^{iv} Though his struggles seem to relent, as soon as he emerges from the woods – where we pick up the story today – Jesus receives word that John has been arrested.^v

The sequence of these events establishes an unsteady pattern: moments of faithfulness and humility – baptism and fasting and a heavenly wait staff; followed promptly by moments of challenge – alienation, temptation, and a trusted companion's imprisonment.

This feels like a lot for a young person to get their heart around – for *anyone* to manage, even the Very God of Very God. Indeed, for Jesus "the Peace of God, it is no Peace" – that remarkable claim from Walker Percy's "Uncle Will," in our Gospel hymn.^{vi} See, no matter the "Prosperity Gospel" preachers' empty promises of good fortune as an inevitable consequence of professing Christ as Lord, *in the scriptures*, Jesus' faithfulness more often portends hardship.

Facing his challenges, Jesus "withdraws" from his Nazareth hometown to Capernaum in Galilee.^{vii} Geographically, this withdrawal is modest – effectively, Jesus withdrew from Malden to Revere – suggesting that his turning away marks as much an interior movement as a physical one, an effort to visit his vocation apart from the clatter of his most familiar settings. See, **physically, emotionally, and spiritually, Jesus has entered that deeply affecting process of *leaving home***. Appreciating that his has been a loving hearth, Jesus realizes the heaviness his decision brings to bear not only on himself, but upon the people who have cared for him, who have loved him since his first breath of this world in a manger, not so long ago.

As the action continues, the text gives no indication that Jesus sets out along the beach to tack "Help Wanted" flyers to the piers and look for disciples. Rather, Jesus sees two brothers throwing their nets into the lake – hardly noteworthy given the location – and the idea of their call seems to fall upon Jesus as suddenly as it arrives to Andrew and Peter.^{viii} Without warning, Jesus says to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."^{ix} The three men then begin walking together, and they come upon James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John, fishing with their dad.^x Jesus calls out to those boys, too, and like Andrew and Peter before them, "immediately they leave their boat" and follow Jesus.^{xi}

In Matthew's storytelling, this scene reads as scripted as the first big number of a musical:

Jesus, wearing sandals and a leather jacket with the collar upturned, struts down the bank of the Sea, dancing and snapping his fingers. With more than a little Vinnie Barbarino^{xii} going, he points to the fishermen with "their hair slicked back and their Wafarers on."^{xiii} The fishermen lift their heads from their work, emphatically throw down their nets, and toss off their Galilean-styled outdoor wear to reveal plain white T-shirts with cigarettes rolled up in the sleeves. They begin strutting and pointing back at Jesus, walking across the water toward him.

Meanwhile, moms and sisters and girlfriends sing and snap Ronettes-style back-up from between the wooden surf, neatly cut waves set in rows that move in opposing directions.^{xiv} At the front of the stage the lonely fathers pick up the nets their sons left behind. Clenching the nets to their hearts, they wave farewell in time with the music, smiling as if this song were an uplifting one.

As ridiculous as *Jesus, The Musical* sounds, Matthew's narrative – at least as outrageously – understates this scene's messiness. In truth, these leavetakings would have been terribly difficult for the disciples and for their families to accept. The Evangelist's tidiness has the effect of amplifying the singularity of these characters and this moment, inviting an, "Oh, that was Andrew and Peter. You know, they're like Super Christians – that's why they're in the story. Besides, their lives back then were not as complicated as mine is now."

Well, just as such a swift turn would not be simple now, of course it would not have been easy then. To follow Jesus, Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John, all abandoned the established order of their loved ones' provisioning: having been born and raised into their fathers' trades, their parents expected these young men to provide for their families, not only for a season, but *for their lifetimes*. Likewise, they left their most intimate relationships: rather than a catchy dance number, they sent heartbreaks washing ashore – wounded jellyfish, raw and stinging – and I do not believe that these subsistence fishermen would have left their essential responsibilities without measuring the consequences of those actions. Indeed, for me, the scene's integrity – and the power of the characters' examples – *depends* upon their due diligence.

Physically, emotionally, and spiritually, these first disciples – like Jesus – have entered that deeply affecting process of *leaving home*. And taking stock of the difficulties behind and before them, they still make the decision to go.^{xv}

Whether one's home of origin gave life or took it, moving from our familiar hearth into the unknown can feel as scary as exciting, not only for the single sojourner, but for all who love them. Even when one leaves "on schedule" – as an orderly and essential part of The Path To Adulthood – everyone from neighbors to the Nazarene Postal Service must meet them in a new way. As they set off, roles and identities in their relational nexus change. And it is hard.

Given all this, perhaps today's Gospel points toward a greater calling: **that we all would make our shared home in God.**

No matter the difficulty by which we come to the living Christ's door, and no matter the trouble that may await us on its other side—our home in God promises a different security than the home we leave. Be clear, I don't mean this only ethereally, but practically. When we are members of the Body of Christ, we encounter God's graciousness when a generous and warm congregation welcomes us when we are new; we encounter Christ's reassurance when a parish community takes time to know us and love us; we encounter the Holy Spirit's inspiration when we spend time "in gladness and singleness of heart."

Home awaits us wherever the loving Body of Christ gathers, yet we still must dare our homemaking in that setting.

I have a friend with whom I've traveled often over the last 20 years. A careful and thoughtful organizer, he always unpacks his suitcase into the dresser at the motel or hotel or home where we are staying. He takes out the Gideons Bible, sets it on the credenza, and lays out his socks and his t-shirts in the emptied top drawer, even if we will be there only a single night.^{xvi} Finding a place for all he brings, he makes home wherever we go.^{xvii}

Sunday after Sunday during the announcements, I offer the now-familiar refrain: "If you are a guest among us, we hope that you will find a home for your faith *here*." And I mean it. For the whole project of being Church is about our shared homemaking, in God and with one another.

Whether you see yourself as the fisherfolk accepting Jesus' demanding invitation; as the unnamed onlookers, still discerning a call to action; or even as the parents letting loose your children into their next adventures;^{xviii} dare find a home *here*.

Whether you are visiting Trinity Church for the first time or your family laid the first Dedham Granite of this sanctuary, make this your home.

Be safe here. Be loved here. Unpack what you have brought and find a drawer for all your things. Lay down your nets, sing a song, and enjoy the company of the one who created us, who loves us, and who set us free.

Amen.

ⁱ Percy, William Alexander. "They cast their nets in Galilee." *The Hymnal 1982*, The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1985, 661.

ⁱⁱ Matthew 4:1.

iii Matthew 4:3-10.

iv Matthew 4:11.

v Matthew 4:11-12.

vi My favorite hymn in the book. Walker Percy taught Creative Writing at LSU (though just before my time). Following the suicides of both his parents, the young Walker lived his teenage years with his uncle, William Alexander Percy. The latter penned this difficult text.

vii Matthew 4:12-13.

viii Matthew 4:18.

ix Matthew 4:19.

x Matthew 4:21.

xi Matthew 4:22.

xii [Mr. Travolta](#). And [again](#). And, of course, [again](#).

xiii I'm not a big Eagles or Don Henley fan, though Henley gets points with me for his environmentalist efforts to preserve East Texas/Northwest Louisiana wetlands. All duly noted, "[Boys of Summer](#)" remains a great song (a fact I attribute more to Mike Campbell who co-wrote it) and a classic video.

xiv Sticking to the summers of 1984 and 1985 apparently, "[Just like Ronnie sang](#)."

xv Returning to Percy: "Young John who trimmed the flapping sail, homeless in Patmos died. Peter who hauled the teeming net, head down was crucified."

xvi My friend has one of those clear-plastic ditty bags with the several zippered pouches of potions and equipment; I know our next adventure is underway when I see it unfurled on the back of the bathroom door.

xvii Probably 30 years ago now, I sent to the Marlboro man some number of cigarette proofs-of-purchase (I would rather not think about how many it must have been), and I received a leather doc kit for my investment in the Philip Morris Company. I still keep my toiletries in that simple bag above my bathroom sink. In the mornings, I will shave, shake my razor dry, and toss it into the kit. I brush my teeth and set my toothbrush's handle into one of the zippered compartments on the outside of the bag. Having caught up on both family and dental visits since that first reclusive year of the pandemic, I've collected several travel-size tubes of toothpaste, and lately I've been diligently working my way through the smaller tubes before I return to regularly using the full-sized one. All of this causes some domestic concern: *why live out of a suitcase while you're at home?* I read the habit more positively, as my bringing my old homes into the one I make now. That doc kit nestles Shreveport and Pollock and Baton Rouge and Lafayette and Austin on a shelf right next to Boston and my mouthwash. And I like that.

xviii A little on the nose for this preacher.