

## **“To Fish, To Follow, and To Be a Fool”**

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**Matthew 4:12-23**

**1 Corinthians 1:10-18**

“The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light,” proclaims the quote from Isaiah which Matthew slips into this gospel text. Have you ever intentionally closed your eyes and tried to walk in your own darkness, to see if you could still get to where you are going without bumping into anything? My sister began her story with that question. Being a Fowler, who is prone to do weird things exactly like that, naturally I responded to my sister Alice, “well of course I have done that!” “Well, anyway,” Alice continued, “I was at my job and needed to walk from one floor to the other. Seeing as there weren’t any people on the hallway, I closed my eyes to see if I could get to the elevator without bumping into anything. And I did! I made it safely to the elevator bank, felt for the button, pressed the up button, and when I heard the elevator ding open, I briefly opened my eyes to make sure the elevator was there and not some cavernous void. Then I closed my eyes again and felt my way to the buttons on the elevator wall. But instead of feeling another set of buttons, I felt the buttons on a man’s suit! I opened my eyes and screamed at the confused looking man I had just molested, and jumped out of the elevator-- whose doors then took an eternity to close. The man told me, “I hope you won’t be driving home...””

I found my sister’s story hilarious, especially because it is the very kind of foolish thing I could see myself doing. So much so that I once stole it and used it like it was my own story. I had just moved to New York City after college, and barely knew anyone there yet. I had invited an acquaintance I had met from my study abroad program, who was also living in New York City, to dinner. She was very smart and sophisticated, and I was still a shy southern girl and nervous about making friends. In a moment of social awkwardness, when enough of a lull had lapsed to make me feel

uncomfortable, I--fearing I had nothing interesting to say or offer-- launched into my sister's story as if it were my own. "You know how you're walking through a hallway, and no one's around, and so you close your eyes to see if you can get to your destination without running into anything?" I asked my friend.

As it turned out, we did become better friends. So much so, that when my sister came to visit me in New York, we had my friend over. As I was getting tea from the kitchen, I bumped into a wall. I laughed at my clumsiness, saying I am always bumping into something. "That reminds me," my friend Karen told me, "of the time you closed your eyes and walked into a man on the elevator." My sister didn't miss a beat: "Wait, you stole my story?" she accused me. I was totally busted.

I like to think of Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John as bumbling along their fishing work with their eyes closed. Sure, their hands knew the contour and texture of the net, and could feel where rips and tears might let a fish escape. Their legs and knees knew where the sturdy parts of the boat would balance them as they leaned against its walls, casting the net into the water. Their ears knew the sound of fish heavy in the net, fins flip-flopping, trying to return to the water that is their home. But it was not until Jesus crossed the threshold of their lives and said, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fish for people" that they truly knew what it meant to walk in the light.

Jesus entered into these fishermen's stories at a liminal moment in their lives. The word *liminal*, first coined by anthropologists, comes from the Latin *limen*, which means threshold, and it speaks to an in-between time in peoples' lives. Quite often liminality is time and space ripe for growth and transformation. Social and religious rituals like graduation or adult baptism mark liminal space. The experience of falling in love with another human being is a liminal moment in a relationship. People struggling to understand their gender identity live in a liminal space, until they are ready to proclaim what their gender identity really is. A death of a loved one, as my family experienced this past week, can also send someone into liminal space; we are disoriented as we try to figure out our identities: "who am *I* now that my grandfather, my beloved spouse, my mother, has died? Liminality is often disorienting; routines or social hierarchies

are upset; assumptions are challenged; and the future becomes uncertain. All of this sounds frightening. However, in bold acts of sorting out, individuals and even groups that find themselves in liminal time and space might come out with a repurposed and more profound experience of life.

I have worked in churches since I was in college, and in all those churches until this one, working with teenagers was a big part of my calling there. One reason I have always said yes to that work is because I very often get to meet teenagers at liminal points in their lives. They discover the power of their own choices, and how they might live once they are not under their parents' constant guidance. They realize the power of their relationships, and explore who they are through the eyes of one another, even as they try to find their own sense of self. Some, if they are lucky, develop a passion for an art form, or a sport, or an academic subject-- which may not become a career path but will certainly become a life-long love for them. Teens are figuring out their own code of ethics, and testing how that might play out in the real world. My hope is that in this shape-shifting time, teenagers might discover God for the first time on their own terms; not just the God they have been lovingly handed down by their parents or other adults who care for them, if they are lucky.

“Come, follow me; I will make you fish for people.” I love it that we get a glimpse of Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John landing in that liminal place of their encounter with Jesus. It was like their eyes were suddenly opened, and they chose that pathway that would make them part of a larger story worth telling. Not to say that what they were already doing wasn't significant. Surely fishing was a respectable enough career path. They lived in a fishing village along the Sea of Galilee-- which isn't actually a sea, but a large freshwater lake. We know James and John followed the occupation of their dad, Zebadee; presumably, fishing is just what any able-bodied man would do when living in a village along the sea of Galilee. But we must not confuse these men's occupation-- their work-- with their vocation-- their calling. Something about their encounter with Jesus shook them to the core and made them realize that *their story* was necessary to complete *God's story*-- and it caused them to follow.

Jesus told them, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” The Greek

word for *repent* is *metanoia*-- which to me sounds like highly annoyed, but actually means “change your hearts and lives,” as the Common English Bible translates. And to say the kingdom of heaven has come near-- well, that is to say that all of earth is in a liminal place, for God’s presence is going to embrace and embody the earth.

Church can also be a somewhat liminal space-- a place where God’s *metanoia* can happen. One thing I have learned to do whenever I notice someone visiting the church, if I get the chance to talk to them before they shuffle out the door since not everyone is a coffee hour kind of social being, is to ask a simple question, “What brought you to church today?” Sometimes, their answer is as simple as “I saw the sign and I thought I’d check it out.” And that’s a fine reason to come, and exactly why we wanted that sign; we can leave it at that. But sometimes, people tell me something like, “My life has been feeling rudderless, and I thought church could really help me.” Or, “I lost a parent, and I wanted to return to the faith my parent taught me.” Or share some other part of their lives that tells me that the Holy Spirit is working some important change in them. Some of these folks stick around, and some move on, slipping away like fish flipping out of a torn and tattered net. Whether or not they stay, I consider it a huge honor for the church to take the chance to walk with such people on their journeys.

Sometimes our nets get messy, torn, and tangled. Paul’s missionary colleague Chloe had informed Paul of all the quarrels happening between the brothers and sisters of that early church. The community had broken out into personality cults that fractured the early church even more than personality cliques fracture the lunchroom in middle school. Some claimed allegiance to Cephas, others to Appolos, some to Paul, and only some would say they belonged to Christ.

Like Paul, my hope for the church right now is that we can know that *we belong God and to each other*-- not to any one dynamic member or leader. And in our belonging to one another, the body of Christ emerges. Each member is important; without your story, God’s story cannot be complete.

Then Paul does something weird. He calls the message of the cross foolishness. And

I guess if you think about it, to worship a God who would choose to come into this broken world as a tiny baby, to worship someone who was crucified does seem foolish.

What I have decided is that each follower of Jesus must decide to be, must *risk* being, the fool. But Paul also goes on to tell us that this story just might save your life.

I circle back to the Elevator Story I told to my friend-- a story not my own-- because I did not believe that what I had to offer was valuable enough or interesting enough. Many also share that fear-- what I have to say or offer is not good enough. The kind of work I want to do is not important enough. You can fill in the blank, whether you feel too young or too awkward or too made fun of... whether you feel too old or too grouchy or too wounded... whether you feel too sinful or too cynical...whether you feel your accent is too thick or you are just plain tired. To be fishers of people, you must be willing to weave your story-- as broken, incomplete and unpolished as it may be -- into the story of Jesus. The story of Jesus is a ridiculous one and an incredible one. The last will be first and the first will be last. A child born in a stable will be the son of God. Love your enemies. Death does not have the last word. You will probably sound like a fool telling it. But I can guarantee it will be an interesting story, a story worth telling, and a story worth hearing. And nobody can tell it quite like you can. Let the storytelling begin! Amen.