

Fishing has been in the news a lot recently, or certainly, it has been in England. The Brexit deal was very nearly derailed at the last minute because we couldn't reach a satisfactory agreement about fishing with the French and they were arguing about how much fish they could take out of British waters. Then there was another fishing-related uproar the same week because when the new COVID restrictions came in, fishing was banned. This caused a huge ruckus and after about a week of bitter campaigning, it was overruled and people were allowed to go fishing again. But it does say something about the world we live in that someone's sitting on the banks of a canal with a rod in their hand can be considered to be involved in a dangerous activity.

There are several words that I would associate with such an activity, boring being top of the list, but dangerous, not. But such is the world in which we live. Our gospel story also features four fishermen, though they weren't using rods. The fishermen there were using nets. And I noticed as I read the passage this week that the nets feature quite prominently in the story. In fact, they're mentioned three times. So I want to look at the role they play in this gospel story set for today.

Apparently, fishermen like Peter in the Sea of Galilee would have had a number of different types of nets. They even had nets for evening fishing and day fishing. All the nets were made very, they were very delicately made. They would have rocks with holes drilled in them to sink some bits. And then they'd also have cork on other bits of the net to make it rise to the top. They were all very carefully crafted and they took care to look after them.

And as Jesus passed by Simon and Andrew, he saw them casting their net into the sea, went a little later, he saw James and John, they were in their boat mending their nets. Casting, a net, mending a net. This was the fishermen's lot. Day after day, the same thing, the same sea, the same boat. Day after day, it was wind, water, fish, sore muscles, cast the net, cast it again, and if they weren't casting the net, then they were mending it. Casting and mending, casting and mending.

Now, we might not know much about fishing, but I reckon that we all know something about casting and mending. Casting and mending, day after day, the same thing. Working hard just to stand still. Casting and mending are the realities of life, the day-to-day activities that make up our life, and what we see in this story is that this was also the circumstance in which Jesus came to his disciples.

When Jesus came to the disciples here, they weren't in the temple. They weren't praying. They weren't doing

anything religious. They were casting and mending. They were busy with their nets. It's not even clear from this text that they noticed Jesus approaching them. It was Jesus who went up to them and reached out to them, and still Jesus shows up in the ordinary places of life and interrupts the daily routine of casting and mending. The key question is are we paying attention? Do we notice? Do we notice the presence of Jesus in our lives?

Well, one clue I'd like to suggest, which might just make us pause, is where we feel joy. Joy about a small thing or joy about a big thing. Let's stop, notice and savor what is causing us joy. It could be that that's a sign that the spirit of Jesus with us.

I was on retreat in Joshua Tree this week where I always loved to go and I took my bike and I had a very long cycle through the park. It was a very wet and cold. In fact, I think it was the coldest I've ever been since I've been in California and I came around the corner at one point and saw a rainbow.

Now, normally I'd just think, "Oh, look, there's a rainbow," and carry on. But this time I got off my bike, sat on a rock, enjoyed and savored the rainbow, which led me into a time of deep prayer and a rather damp bottom. Let's be sure to notice the God who is close by, whose presence in our lives we so often miss because we're so busy casting and mending.

Jesus came to the disciples where they were in the midst of their daily life and he called them. "Follow me," He said. Now this wasn't how a religious teacher normally got followers. Teachers or rabbis, at that time, did have followers. But what would happen is that people would go approach them and say, "Master, rabbi, can I be one of your disciples, one of your followers?" And then the rabbi would talk to them, perhaps interview them, take up some references, find out more about them and then see if they would want to take them on.

That isn't what happened here. Jesus seems to call the disciples out of the blue and the response he gets reminds us that this is a miracle story. Jesus calls these four fishermen and immediately they follow. No hesitation. No questions asked. Is this because they're superhuman, holy people? Of course not. These are the same guys who later on in the same gospel deny and abandon Jesus. There is ordinariness fallible as the rest of us. They immediately follow Jesus here because it's Jesus who makes it possible for them to do so.

The writer, Barbara Brown Taylor writes this, "This is not a story about us. It's a story about God and about God's

ability, not only to call us, but also to create us as a people who are able to follow. Able to follow, because we cannot take our eyes off the one who calls us because He interests us more than anything else in our lives, because He seems to know what we hunger for, and because He seems to be the food."

So Simon, Peter, Andrew, James, and John respond to Jesus's call and then it's at this point that the nets feature again in the story. It says, "Immediately they left their nets and followed Him." They left their nets. They left behind the very nets they'd spent so much time making and mending.

Now, I have to admit that if Mark, the gospel writer, was writing this story about me and I was one of the fishermen, when he gets to this part, the story would go, Jesus says, "Follow me" and immediately the questions followed, where are we going, how long will it be, what do I need to take, do I need a sandwich, where are we going to stay?

But that conversation doesn't take place in our gospel story. Jesus, doesn't offer a map, an itinerary, or a destination, only an invitation. This is not the type of journey for which we can prepare. This is an inner journey, an inner journey to the deepest part of our being, that place where God, by His spirit, resides. It's not about planning and organizing, making lists, packing supplies. If anything, this journey is about leaving behind. The invitation "follow me" is also an invitation to leave behind, to leave behind our nets and our boats.

And that's the hard part for us. We're very good at accumulating and clinging to things but not so good at letting go and leaving behind. More often than not, our spiritual growth will inevitably involve some element of letting go. We never get anywhere new as long as we're unwilling to leave where we are. We accept Jesus's invitation to follow not by packing up, but by letting go, leaving behind. "Follow me" is both the invitation to, and the promise of new life.

So what are the nets that entangle us? What are the little boats that contain our lives? What do we need to let go and leave behind so that we might follow?

I had a little letting go on retreat. I let go of my phone and my constant need to keep up to date with all the news and the stuff that goes around. And you know. it felt good! I realized how much the noise and the clamor of the world was getting in the way of my relationship with God. I had to find silence again, and in that silence, I realized how long it had been till I'd been, since I'd been properly quiet.

In my world, there was a very smooth transition of power this week. I left for Joshua Tree on Monday with one president came back on Thursday with another one safely installed, without me knowing anything about it. But I did have the space and the opportunity to know something about God and his presence in my life.

I want to close by saying that this story is not to be understood as an encouragement to change career, disown family, or move to a new town. "Follow me" is the invitation to a new life. If these four fishermen accept the invitation, their lives will be forever different. They will no longer catch just fish, they will "fish for people," Jesus says, and when Jesus says, "I will make you fish for people," he's describing a transformation in their life, not simply a new job of catching new members or followers. If they were carpenters, he could just as easily have said to them, "Follow me, and you will build the kingdom of heaven." To the farmers, "Follow me and you will grow God's people." To doctors, "Follow me and you will heal the brokenness of the world." To the teachers, "Follow me and you will open minds and hearts to the presence of God." To the parents, "Follow me and you will nurture new life."

Whatever your life is, however you spend your time, there is in that life Jesus's call to "Follow me." "Follow me," is the call to participate with God in God's saving work. It's the work of change and growth. That work is always about moving to a larger vision, orientating our life in a new direction, and experiencing our little story. our little story of life connected to that much grander, larger story of God's life in the world.

The four fishermen were given a new identity. They didn't simply become something that they weren't already, but they were changed. They became transformed fishermen. This is a story about letting go of our own little life so that we can receive God's life, and this letting go happens in the context of our every day activities: work, school, family, paying the bills, running errands, fixing dinner, relationships, trying to do the right thing. It happens in the midst of the casting and mending of our nets.

These are the times and places that Jesus shows up and calls us into a new way of being and our world changes. It happened for Simon, Andrew, James, and John. It can happen still, too, for you and for me. Amen.