

**Pastor Adrienne Meier**  
**January 25, 2026, Third Sunday after the Epiphany**  
**Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana**

### **When the Nets No Longer Hold**

#### **Matthew 4:12-23**

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.”

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishers. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. Jesus went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

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They left their nets. Abandoned them on the shore. In just a sentence—eight words—they move, immediately, from fishing of one sort to fishing of another kind altogether. Matthew is almost cavalier about it, as if leaving behind everything they knew was so simple: put down your nets, put on your trainers, and get on with it. But that can’t possibly be the whole story. If I told you to go into a whole new profession today, you wouldn’t do it. If I told you to move out, move on to a new place tomorrow, you probably wouldn’t do it, not unless you’d already been thinking about it, not unless you were already ready, not unless you needed to do something else, be somewhere else, say something else. There is so much more to the story here—so much more than eight words can hold. Simon and Andrew leave their nets because these fishing nets are no longer the proverbial safety net for them. There is so much more to the story here because, though they abandon their nets, though they feel left behind by an Empire that has no value for their work, let alone themselves, though they abandon the lakeshore, they are never abandoned by God.

In Luke’s gospel, when Jesus calls the disciples, he sits in Simon’s boat, put out a bit from shore so he can be seen and heard by the gathered crowds. And when he’s done preaching, he instructs Simon where to put the boat, where to cast the net for a phenomenal catch. And they do catch hundreds of fish, so many that the boats couldn’t

hold them. But, in Matthew's gospel, and Mark's before him, Simon has no boat. It seems likely that Luke added this detail, maybe he thought Mark omitted it?

But what if it is actually a careful detail? There is a lot of evidence that, under Roman rule, the Sea of Galilee was heavily overfished. The demand from Rome for more and more fish was high, especially for a specialty fermented fish paste the region was known for. But the take-home cut of fishers and farmers was lower and lower, year after year. As Gary Nabhan outlines in *Jesus for Farmers and Fishers*, if a fisher wanted to use a public dock, there was a tax collector on hand demanding payment. There was a broker asking for a take at the markets. The roads were private, so there was a toll collector with a hand out for payment. And then poor harvests hit, and boats and farm acres are mortgaged. Who can, pardon the pun, stay afloat in that?

Of course, Simon and Andrew might be casting from the shore because they were catching bait—I watched a couple of YouTube videos on the intricacies of shore casting. But is it possible that Simon and Andrew are on the shore because they no longer have a boat to fish from? Do they leave the nets behind because the safety net that had supported their family for generations is gone, long gone?

I think about the wilderness box in the Godly Play curriculum. It gets pulled out in many of the stories we tell, a pile of sand that the storyteller moves like a dune, like the desert sand shaped by wind. And the storyteller enumerates the cold nights and hot days, the stinging sand, the shifting landscape of the wilderness, and she says, always says, "no one goes into the wilderness unless you have to." No one abandons their nets, their livelihoods, their families, their homes—unless they have to.

The wilderness looks different for different people. Sometimes it is sand and hunger and exposure. Sometimes it is fear for your family's safety, that drives you far from home. Sometimes it is telling the truth about who you are, knowing that truth may cost you safety, belonging, or love. Sometimes it is speaking out with courage, knowing that you can no longer be party to injustice. But nobody goes there, unless they have to.

In this story, Jesus has just returned from the wilderness, where the spirit led him after his baptism. He has returned from one wilderness to another, because Empire has once again drawn near to his life in violence: arresting his beloved friend, John the Baptizer. And yet withdrawing doesn't seem to suit Jesus. He makes him home there—there among the people whose lives and livelihoods are changing rapidly. He may have withdrawn to Capernaum by the Sea, but almost immediately picks up John's refrain, a loud protest in the face of the Reign of Rome, proclaiming, "Repent for the Reign of God, the kin-dom of God, has come near."

I think of Simon and Andrew, as their profits dwindled, as they and their colleagues are priced out of the market, unable to afford for themselves and their families the very fish they bring to market. I imagine the moment where they realize it isn't going to work

anymore. The moment when they go, hat in hand, to a moneylender. How they couldn't look when their boat sailed away, captained by another. How they were on the shore that day wondering how much longer before they had to hire out their bodies to those who fancied themselves owners of the sea. I imagine them, restless at night, praying the prayers of the anxious, the disheartened, the frightened—prayers that they, that their families might be safe, might be, mercifully, spared. The kinds of prayers that ascend today from places where war and gangs and militaries have taken up residence on the streets. The kinds of prayers where the lakes are running dry, and there is no clean water. The kinds of prayers where laws are made to exclude, expose, expunge. And will God answer?

Rabbi Tarfon was a Jewish sage, a Rabbi, who lived and taught in Israel after the Fall of the Temple in 70 A.D. Some of his teachings are compiled in a Jewish text called Pirkei Avot, including one commenting on Micah 6:8, "Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your God." Rabbi Tarfon says, "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly now, love mercy now, walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it." And while I think Micah, Rabbi Tarfon, are talking to us, magnifying God's call, God's invitation to follow, I think these words are prayers, too, a reminder that God has bound herself to humanity, and that God does not consider herself free to abandon us.

And in that way, echoing through the pages of Matthew's story is the promise of Emmanuel, God-with-us, of someone whose name means "God saves." And this person, whose infant presence rattles tyrants, this Jesus, shows up on the shores of Galilee. And, in the words of Desmond Tutu, pushed back the horizons of our hopes, and invited the brave to follow.

Amen.