

3rd Sunday after the Epiphany (Year A)

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 lake, 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 lake—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for 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 Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

The painting on the front of today's bulletin is a piece of art, created in 2001, entitled "Calling Disciples." It is by the Chinese liturgical artist He Qi (pronounced *huh chee*). This is not the first time that his works have graced our bulletins and it most certainly won't be the last.

The first thing to note of this painting is its warm palette of colors. The reds, oranges, and yellows explode onto the page to depict a sunset not unlike that we might see off of Bootlegger's Alley here on Shelter Island at the end of the day. At the bottom of the painting, you notice that the setting sun casts purple shadows at the feet of Jesus and the disciples. Although today's passage from Matthew makes no mention of the time of day that Jesus is taking a stroll by the Sea of Galilee, it would make sense that the sun was setting because, as all fishermen know, such tends to be a good time for fishing. The fish tend to head to deep waters to escape the heat of the day and then tend to come to the surface once the sun's rays retire for the evening. He Qi's painting also includes seven birds who fill the air, another sign that the fishing was good (as every fishermen will tell you, it's a pretty good rule of thumb to "follow the birds").

Jesus stands front and center in an almost feminine likeness, standing reverently with his hands outstretched in an invitational pose. While the rest of the characters in the image gaze elsewhere, Jesus stares straight ahead, his eyes fixed relentlessly upon us, the viewers of this dramatic scene. His robe is white and yet soiled at the bottom, perhaps hinting that sand has found its way onto his garbs. On either side of him are two disciples. It is safe to presume that the two disciples on our left (Jesus' right) are Andrew and Peter. The boat behind them is empty, having been seemingly abandoned as a result of their decision to follow this Jesus fellow. The one closest to Jesus has his hands folded in prayer. We are left to imagine the tone of his prayer. I, for one, believe that he is praying an anxious one. You probably would

too if you were about to leave everything behind. Perhaps, then, he is praying for God's protection as he steps into the great unknown. His brother, on the outside, seems to sense his sibling's nervousness and places his hand supportively upon his brother's shoulders.

On the right side of the painting, to Jesus' left, we see James and John. Again, we are left to guess which is which. The one closest to Jesus stands with his left hand jutting out in an awkward pose, as if he were extending it to shake Jesus' hand. His right hand appears to reach behind him to grasp his brother's. Meanwhile, the brother out the outside is the only disciple who does not gaze into the heavens. His face is hidden because his focus has not left his father who has been left on the boat. This brother's hand waves wistfully to his father who, likewise, waves back from a distance with the net they had been mending together in his other hand.

I cannot help but wonder if that waving disciple on the right was having second thoughts. We could hardly blame him if he was. There are few things that cause more anxiety than the coming of change - the movement from that which is familiar to that which is unknown. Such is perhaps a third reason that the sunset is a fitting time for this story to happen. Sunset is nothing more than a transition. A long day surrenders to the night. The birds come out. The fish come up. The nets get mended and tossed forth. The beauty of the sunset is a signal that things are moving - a fiery oracle that announces the coming (or leaving) of the tide.

These four disciples must have known that the tide was about to sweep them off to unexpected places. In my opinion, to imagine them leaving with Jesus with absolutely no hesitancy, no questions, no reluctance, is both an unrealistic interpretation and a sanitized version of today's story. I believe the Gospel writer Matthew deliberately does not tell us what the disciples said because he knew that to do otherwise would rob us of the responsibility of using our imaginations to conjure up what *we* would have said and done should we have been in their feet.

"But I love my father!" "How will I make a living?" "Where will I sleep?" "Why on earth would you choose *me*?" "What about my family?" "Can I have one more day before I go?" "Where are we going?" "What are we going to do?" "Why are we going to do that?" "Couldn't you find someone more qualified than *me* (not to mention my brother!)"

Perhaps the reason Matthew left out the questions of the disciples in today's story is because he knew that to do so would take up much more room in his Gospel than he was willing to surrender...

I suspect that many of these questions, and perhaps many more are being asked nowadays by people like you and me. I invite you to look again at He Qi's painting.

Perhaps you are waving to another family member, asking God if she or he will be safe and happy?

Perhaps you are holding the hand of someone you love, asking God if everything is going to be ok?

Perhaps you are placing your hand on your brother or sister, asking if there is anything you can do to help them in their time of anxiety.

Perhaps you are the child in the painting, waving to a family member that you have had to say goodbye to.

Perhaps you are the disciple with his hands clasped in prayer, simply looking up to heaven and praying, "please."

This painting, in all of its beauty and heart-wrenching drama, forces me (and perhaps you as well) to focus on Jesus. After all, he stands firmly in the middle, with the setting sun almost serving as a halo upon his head. The burning of the sun echoes the burning of our hearts when we are faced with tough decisions and hard roads. But in the middle, there is Jesus.

Perhaps his outstretched hands are not only inviting the disciples themselves, but perhaps they are inviting their questions, their anxieties, their fears, their doubts. It's almost as if Jesus intentionally places himself smack dab in the middle of this scary transition. It's almost as if Jesus is saying to the disciples, "I want you to follow me *now*, with all of your doubts and worries. I want the *real* you to follow me, not some sanitized version of you that has had time to bury your concerns and your insecurities. I want *you* to be with me and me to be with you, and together, we're gonna go fishing."

Today's image gives us a portrait of the beginning of a great journey. Peter, Andrew, James, and John had, literally, no idea what was coming. I'm quite sure that they had no idea that almost two thousand years later, you and I would be sitting in this very room looking at an artist's depiction of that exact moment. But one thing I'm sure they *did* know. That this Jesus came to them first in a moment of great bittersweetness. This Jesus came to them not when they were in their "Sunday best" but when they were in their dirty fisherman's robes. This Jesus came to them not because they were perfect but because they were imperfect and this Jesus knew that he could work with that. Mixed with the sadness and the questions and the anxieties, there must have been hope. For hope is what drives us to do crazy things like following Jesus. Hope is what calls us to march for justice and protest for equal rights and stand with the oppressed. Hope is the center of our faith just as Jesus is, quite literally, the center of today's Gospel story and He Qi's visual interpretation you see before you.

It may be a trick of the brain, but when I look at Jesus' face in this painting, I see a hint of a smile. A subtle sign that Jesus knows something that the disciples don't. Did they see that smile, I wonder? Probably not, I suppose, because three of them are looking to the heaven's and one of them is still gazing longingly at his father. But they would see that smile in time. For the sun is setting and a new day is on the way. Soon, Peter and Andrew and James and John would depart that beach for other places, places where the providence of God would shine in relentless and prophetic ways. And, what's more, these disciples were not called to be merely witnesses of these miracles, but they were called to partake in them and to share them.

Like the disciples in today's painting, our hands might be holding on to another person's, or they might be waving at another wistfully, or they might be clasped together in prayer or placed upon the shoulder of another. But, ultimately, our calling is to change our posture to that of Jesus'. We are called to move our hands in an outstretched position, one of invitation and warmth and loving kindness. *That's* the posture for fishing. *That's* the posture that we are called to assume together as a community seeking to be fishers of people.

So, as the sun sets and the boats get abandoned, let us keep our gaze upon the Christ who comes to us even in the anxious moments to journey with him to the places where we are called.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.