

# The Park Road Pulpit

*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*

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**And What About Zebedee?**

**Matthew 4.12-23**

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We've heard this story 1000 times, but let me not presume. This one story really marks the beginning for Jesus. The stage has been set – births have been foretold, donkeys have been ridden, the inns have been filled, angels have sung their songs, magi have followed the star, baptism waters have been stirred, and temptations have been conquered. All of this has served as prelude to the real thing. Today we find ourselves at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Today's passage lets us in on who Jesus really is – not just who the prophets of old said he would be, but his ministry is what defines him. And he begins his ministry by acknowledging the power of community and relationship. He begins his ministry by letting us in on a little secret – we are not created to be alone – we are created for partnership. If Jesus is going to do and be what and who he was called to be, he will need some assistance. He begins his ministry by enlisting some help. The passage we read earlier is the calling of the first disciples. "In the Matthean story, these men have never seen Jesus before, have seen no miracles, heard no teachings. No explanation has been given them. They are not told why they should follow Jesus, what following him will mean, or where the path will lead them. We are met here with Jesus' first miracle, the miracle of his powerful word that creates following, that makes disciples." (New Interpreter's, Volume VIII, M. Eugene Boring, page 169)

He met a pair of brothers first. Simon, who we will come to know as Peter – the Rock – the one on whom the Church is to be built, and his brother Andrew. He sees them

casting their nets into the water. I wonder if the fishing was good that day or had it been one of those days – like I have known before, cane pole in hand, squirming earthworm on the hook, hot but with a slight breeze blowing across the water - when nothing was biting. I don't know. All I know is that Jesus issued his favorite two word phrase, his best command, his most compelling request, his call to all of us: *Follow me*. “In this text Jesus appears disruptively in our midst and calls us not to admire him or accept his principles, not even to accept him as our personal Savior, but to follow him. A reasonable response to his command ‘Follow me’ would be ‘Where are you going?’ The fishermen do not yet know the destination, which they must learn along the way. Although Matthew does not use the vocabulary of ‘believe’ and ‘faith’ in this story, he here pictures the nature of faith that is at the heart of discipleship.” (New Interpreter's, Volume VIII, M. Eugene Boring, page 170) Follow me. And they do it. And all of a sudden they are no longer dealing with fish anymore – now they are dealing with people. He moves on and spies another pair of brothers – James and John. They are in the Father and Son family business. I guess they had thrown those nets out and pulled them back in enough times that it was time to do some mending. That's how Jesus found them – in the boat with their father, Zebedee, mending their nets. Jesus called them – and though it doesn't say so – I expect he used his most persuasive catch-phrase: *Follow me*. And they dropped their torn nets and left it all to follow Jesus. And thus begins the gathering of the twelve. And with one third of his help crew in place, he begins *teaching and proclaiming the good news and healing the sick*.

But have you ever asked yourself: And what about Zebedee? I just can't help but wonder about him. He's the minor character in this story – an aside really. Barely

mentioned even, and yet I wonder about him. After throwing those nets out and pulling them back in enough times, Jesus finds Zebedee with his sons doing the menial labor, the repair work of their livelihood. I had never noticed it before. As many times as I have read this pivotal story of the beginning of Jesus ministry, I had never noticed it: James and John AND Zebedee are in that boat and the text says, *and he called them*. And *immediately* the brothers *left the boat and their father, and followed him*. And what about Zebedee? Was he included in the call and chose not to go? Was he hard of hearing and didn't know what was going on until it was too late and he was left holding the broken net? Did he contemplate following as well, but was scared to take the risk? Did he see this as some young and immature impulsive whim of which he would have no part? Was he proud of them for their adventuresome spirit, and did he pine for the days of his own youth when he too would have followed? Or a scarier thought – was he hurt or insulted that perhaps Jesus didn't ask him to come along? Did he not get an invitation at all?

I know what it's like to be known as Jackson and Bennett's mom. When I go to their school, I'm not Amy or Mrs. Dean. What I hear instead is, "Hey Jackson's mom" or "Bennett's mom, I'd like another cookie." That's really all we know about Zebedee – at least he has a name – but all he is is the father of James and John, sons of Zebedee. Why did he not go with them, or was he not invited? Obviously we will never know the answer to these questions, but the more I think about Zebedee, the more I realize that we probably have more in common with him than we do with the main characters of this story.

I've always been so impressed with these first four disciples. Apparently Jesus was so compelling, his presence so irresistible that they could not help but follow him. So

throwing caution to the wind, they left everything, and began a whole new life. But they've always made me feel inadequate and cowardly, because if I'm honest, the likelihood is that I would have stayed in that boat with Zebedee mending the nets and then spending the rest of my life wondering if I had made the right choice. For as many reasons as Zebedee probably had to stay put, I, more than likely, would have stayed perched in that little boat – “safe and secure from all alarms.” (a phrase from the old hymn “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms)

Put yourself in the story. It's one of the best ways to read the Bible. You may be inclined to picture yourself as Simon Peter or Andrew or James or John. And on your better days you may even try to see yourself in Jesus' role. But today, be Zebedee for a few moments. I wonder if Zebedee simply wasn't a risk-taker. Perhaps when weighing his options, leaving it all behind was simply too great of a risk. If this Jesus thing didn't work out, his business, his livelihood, would be gone. So I ask you, Zebedee, are you willing to take the risks that are required in answering the call to follow Jesus?

I wonder if Zebedee simply was too practical. What Jesus had said just didn't make sense, and if something doesn't add up or make sense then it's not doable. “The fishermen are already at work, already doing something useful and important, thus they are not looking for a new life. Jesus' call does not fill an obvious vacuum or meet an obvious need in their lives, but, like the call of prophets in the Hebrew Bible, it is intrusive and disruptive, calling them away from work and family.” (New Interpreter's, Volume VIII, M. Eugene Boring, page 171) The call of Jesus is rarely practical. So, Zebedee, does practicality ever hinder you from gospel living?

I wonder if Zebedee simply desired security. He had a sure thing. He had sons to take care of. A wife that depended on him. He had retirement and his 401Ks to think about. The only security that Jesus ever promised was abundant living, both now and forevermore. But that kind of security doesn't seem to be enough for us – for the abundance of which Jesus speaks has nothing to do with money. Zebedee, are you more interested in safety and security than in answering the call to follow?

I wonder if Zebedee simply didn't get invited. This scenario is really out of bounds in my mind. For I believe with everything that I am that all are welcome within the parameters of the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But I do know that it is tempting for folks to assume that they are not good enough and not worthy to participate in kingdom living. I do know that there are folks who feel sorry for themselves and keep themselves out of the inclusive grace of God. And I do know that there are folks who keep all others, including Jesus, at arms length and then focus blame on all that lies right at their fingertips. And I do know that there are folks who live lives of exclusion. It began when they were always the last one standing to be picked for the team, never called on in class, silenced by their uniqueness. But I don't believe that is ever God's doing. Zebedee, have you excluded yourself from the call of God?

When I consider the possibilities of why Zebedee remained in the boat mending those nets and holding down the family business, it occurs to me that the call of Jesus requires us to be risk-takers. The call of Jesus requires us to leave behind our need for practicality and practice the unbelievable. The call of Jesus pushes us beyond all that makes us feel safe and secure. The call of Jesus forces us to accept that we are loved and forgiven and full of goodness. And as I wonder – what about Zebedee? – I realize that I

don't want to be left in the boat, mending the nets. While comfortable and routine and regular and safe, it's not the Way of Jesus.

“Discipleship is not an offer [humanity] makes to Christ. It is only the call which creates the situation. (The Cost of Discipleship, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, page 68) The call: *Follow me*. I don't want our lives to be spent in the boat, mending the nets. May it be so.

Prayer:

O God, we give thanks for Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John – for their courage to drop everything to follow. Thank you for their yes. And we give thanks for Jesus who is constantly calling: *Follow me*. And for all the times that we, like Zebedee, remain mending the nets, we ask for strength enough to make our way out of the boat that we might follow The Way. Amen.