



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR  
THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, JANUARY 22, 2023  
ISAIAH 9:1-4; PSALM 27: 1, 5-13; 1 CORINTHIANS 1:10-18; MATTHEW 4:12-23

## VOCATION AS MEANING, JOY AND PURPOSE

**Matthew 4:12-23** *[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 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.]*

*Jesus called ordinary people in the midst of their ordinary lives to do extraordinary things...and he still does.<sup>i</sup>*

That's the overarching theme of the gospels according to David Lose, a professor of biblical preaching who now pastors in Minneapolis. His statement resonates with me, and this invitation to the first disciples—ordinary people going about their ordinary

lives—to become fishers of people is a template for us all. It only makes sense if we come to see ourselves in the boats of our lives being called into something extraordinary here and now.

This is a story of vocation, from the Latin *vocare*, to call, but more than just a nod in our direction as a warm body to do some work, it really it is to be bidden, to be seen and invited

individually for who you are, for the gifts you bring to bear in your life.

Fred Buechner once said vocation is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. That is where God calls you.

The Church likes its lexicon, and *vocation* is included in that. What is your vocation, we might ask?

A few years ago the Lilly Foundation funded a study which found that “vocation” is used prevalently in seminary formation and hence in a lot of preaching and teaching by pastors, but that many in the pews did not resonate with the term. Many who attend church and listen to sermons about “call” don't, in fact, feel “called.”

The researchers found a startling thing—that many do not believe that what they do outside church (their work, their family, their community, etc.) is germane to the realm of vocation...that God is not interested in what goes on in those other parts of their lives separate from their life in church. That stops me short, but I think I understand it, if by vocation we mean getting people to ascribe to our religion. I'm not sure there's much deep gladness or spiritual hunger for that.

Jesus is inviting something different.

What if I were to tell you that vocation is not primarily about bending others to your religious ways; to be fishers of people is not about forcing them to become Christians, as if we could anyway. It's about the meaning and joy and the sense of purpose you derive in living a certain way, in being your authentic self in daily life. And it's about being in relationships in ways that are informed by that meaning and joy and sense of purpose. It's about finding our authentic selves in relationship to others. And as Christians, it's about placing our vocation in context with Christ as our guide, not just in church, but in the whole of life. What we do out there matters.

When Jesus calls Peter and Andrew, and James and John, to become fishers of people, Jesus is saying, be in relationship with me, and with one another, which in turn enabled these first disciples to be in relationship with others in authentic ways that changed the world.

The premise stated once more: *Jesus called ordinary people in the midst of their ordinary lives to do extraordinary things...and he still does.*

He is calling us, inviting us to see our vocation as a way of being in relationship with others, modeling our authentic relationships after the sort that Jesus had—

speaking honestly and with compassion, caring for one another and especially for the poor and oppressed, holding onto one another through rough times, holding onto hope that God is up to something in it all, and in us all. If we embrace this as our vocation, it naturally shapes all aspects of our lives—wherever we have opportunity for relationships to form or to heal or to flourish.

What if you saw your vocation this week in light of a relationship you have outside of church—perhaps one that is a source of joy for you, or maybe one of hurt or frustration, or one that is fractured. What if you were to pray for that person, commending them to God’s care, and perhaps in thanksgiving for them, and then ask God to use you to make a difference in the other person’s life in some way, even if you never know what that is. But just by your authentic way of being, informed by your relationship with Christ, you make a difference.

That’s vocation, my friends. Ordinary people, ordinary lives, extraordinary things that change the shape of lives...that change the shape of the world.

The Church is not the sole locus of vocation; it is the proving ground for vocation to find expression in the whole of life. This is the place of practice. The place we come to be encouraged by others and with others who

are seeking to follow the Way as well. To form Christ-shaped relationships across our lives. Compassionate, unselfish, sacrificial even. To make a difference, and to discover the meaning, joy and sense of purpose in who we are and what we do, and trust that God will use us for good in the process.

This is why we have Radix groups, and mutual discernment groups, and affinity groups. If you want to engage in one or more of those, or just learn more, talk to one of the priests. The clergy have the easier part really, because our work (our job) is easily discerned as vocation in this way, which is to say, we find meaning, joy and a sense of purpose in such conversations, in being in relationship with YOU!

In many ways, you have the harder part: I know it is not easy to see vocation in a world that can be contemptuous of religion, because religion has been all too often weaponized to provoke fear or judgment, or to “win souls” for Christ. I hope you hear me saying something different here. No weaponized words, just a way of being that is non-violent and relational.

I know it is not easy to do this in a world which is wary of authenticity, as odd as that may sound. There is a depth of vulnerability that comes with this way of being that will seem foreign to many, even suspicious. That’s

okay, just be yourself, and trust in the patient ferment of hope that your way of being will eventually be seen by someone as trustworthy and true, and they will yearn for that in their lives.

We call the space in which you are sitting the nave for a purpose. The nave is the boat in which we sit and listen for the call of Christ

to follow him, to be like him, to shape our lives after his. *Ordinary people in the midst of our ordinary lives being invited to do extraordinary things... and he still does.*

Will you follow?

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<sup>i</sup> This theme and much of the exegetical and thematic content of this sermon are drawn from an essay by David Lose on the blog Working Preacher, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/fishers-of-people>



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