

A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 4:12-23

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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 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.

Matthew's story of the call of the disciples is preceded by the description of Jesus withdrawing to Galilee after John's arrest and a long description of the land of Galilee in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali as given in the Isaiah prophesy. This story remembers the prophecy and enjoys Isaiah's foreseeing what was going to happen some five to six centuries later. The first sign of the kingdom's presence is the immediate response of the four fishermen.

Verbal Threads

1. A verbal thread that links the episodes to one another is the notice of the kingdom which ends the first episode: "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near." It is also the end of the last episode: "Jesus went throughout Galilee proclaiming the good news of the kingdom."
2. Another verbal thread links the two episodes describing the fishermen whom Jesus calls: "two brothers" and then "two other brothers, James and John."
3. There is also the net motif: "they were casting their nets," "they left their nets," and "they were mending their nets."

4. The other major verbal thread is "follow me" and "they left their nets and followed him."
5. And then of course that he called them. But in the first instance it isn't stated that way, it's just "He said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people,'" and the second "He called them and they left the boat and their father and followed him."

The spirit of these last two episodes is a spirit of immediate recognition of the significance of Jesus and of the four men following him on that mission. It recalls the story of Elisha when Elijah came and put his mantle over him. Elisha immediately recognized the significance of this act, slaughtered his oxen, and left everything to follow Elijah. The Matthew story has that dynamic of the immediate recognition by these peasant fishermen of Jesus' importance and significance, and of their immediately leaving everything and following him.

This, in turn, is related to Jesus' mission of the proclamation of the coming of the kingdom of God and the redefinition of what the kingdom of God meant. The sign of this new kingdom is that Jesus cures every disease and every sickness among the people rather than recruiting an army to conquer the Gentiles. What Jesus recruits is not an army but disciples who are going to fish for people. The actions that he does in establishing his kingdom are to teach, to proclaim, and to cure.

The story invites us to tell it with gusto and a sense of wonder and surprise. This is extraordinary, not normal.