

When I read Matthew 4, verses 18 to 20, I am amazed. There are many scriptures that amaze me, but few as much as this one: *As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” At once they left their nets and followed him.* I’ve wondered if they, along with James and John who were called next, had any idea of what they were getting themselves into? Peter, Andrew, James, and John had no crystal ball that day when Jesus called them. There they were, just another day at work; casting nets and pulling them back in, sorting and salting the fish, taking them to market, and maintaining their equipment.

They were born to be fishermen, because they came from a line of fishermen. These four men were not fishing for fun or recreation, there was no drifting boat on a calm pond with a packed lunch for these men. Their lives didn’t have many lazy days for they did hard work every day. Their muscles would ache from throwing and hauling the nets, their hands were cut from the sharp knives and fish spines. They would always carry the smell of fish but theirs was a stable and profitable occupation. They weren’t rich, but they made a decent living, but it certainly wasn’t a glamorous lifestyle.

Jesus called them from that life, and they knew what they were leaving. What they didn’t know was what Jesus was calling them to! We have the advantage of reading the Gospels and knowing how things turned out. We know the joys and wonders in store for them. We know they will see and experience things they could not have imagined on that first day. They saw miraculous healings. Would it be worth leaving everything behind in order to see a paralysed man walk away? Was leaving their nets worth seeing a little girl raised from the dead? We know that they heard intriguing parables. What would we give up to hear Jesus say personally to us: *To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven (Matt 13:11).* What would that kind of spiritual insight be worth?

How much of a pay cut would we endure in order to see the power, intensity, and energy of the Transfiguration, as Peter, James, and John saw? (Matt 17). Responding to Jesus' call opened up for these four men a spiritual adventure they never could have found on their own. What decision would the men have made if they had known everything? Would they have considered the miracles, the parables, and the presence of Jesus worth the cost? Accepting Jesus' call put them at risk although I don't think they realised this at the time they left their nets. John the Baptist had just been arrested and he would be executed. Danger lurked behind the scenes in Jesus' call. Would these fishermen have responded so readily if they'd known about the Garden of Gethsemane, or the crucifixion? What would James have done if he had known that Herod would have him beheaded? (Acts 12).

From the way Matthew presents the scene of their call, it appears that not one of them hesitated for a second. (For a contrast, let's read [John 1: 35 to 42](#)). In John's gospel, the first disciples take some time to respond to Jesus. John the Baptist announces boldly to them who Jesus is. The would-be disciples check out Jesus' living quarters. They have a chance to think it over (John 1:29-42). But the way Matthew presents the call, we aren't even sure these four know who Jesus is. *The emphasis in Matthew's gospel is on how much we don't know when we respond to Jesus. Matthew seems to want us to know that we really are taking a leap into the dark when we respond.*

Some of us may like John's gospel a little better. We receive some assurance of who Jesus is and this gives us a little time to decide to follow or not. The emphasis in John's gospel is important. We don't want to follow blindly some cult leader or charlatan. We may need John's emphasis on getting some things straight and taking some time. Matthew is right though. No matter how much we study or read up, or how carefully we make our decision to follow Jesus, we won't know what lies ahead of us when we respond.

Not only do the four men leave quickly when Jesus calls them, but they leave everything behind. Even though fishing was hard work, it was their livelihood.

They had invested time in learning the trade, acquiring fishing rights, procuring their boats and equipment. A person didn't become a successful commercial fisherman overnight. In both cases, Jesus calls the new disciples in the middle of an important activity. Simon and Andrew had just cast their net and from Matthew's account it seems that they didn't even wait to pull the net back in one last time. Matthew says they responded immediately. They don't even cash in that day's profits! James and John are mending their nets as they hear the call. They are preparing for their next expedition and they were looking to their future. The way this scene reads, if Jesus had called golfers, he would have called them when they were at the top of their backswing. We don't know what went through their minds but they let go of their nets.

We don't know what the four disciples thought, but we know some things about what Matthew thought of Jesus' mission. Jesus came to bring light to those who had lived in darkness and part of that darkness was political oppression. Isaiah had talked about the darkness caused by the Assyrian domination of the new disciples' ancestors. Now, it was the Romans who were oppressing the people. Part of the darkness was hopelessness, part of the darkness was illness. Another part of the darkness was spiritual depression and anguish. *Jesus came to bring light into the darkness. He came to bring the dominion of heaven near. Jesus brought a sample of what it will be like to be in God's full presence, to experience true justice and fairness where everyone has enough and to live in joy. In Jesus, God has reached into our world to bring hope.* For Matthew, being part of that ministry was worth letting go of our fishing nets and leaving our old life behind.

Jesus continues to call disciples. We are not always called to leave our jobs or our homes to follow, although some are. Some folk are even called to leave a cushy number in Edinburgh's Cooncil and move to Glasgow! For some, they are called to leave high-paying jobs to do a ministry that pays a fraction of what their old job paid, although I am not complaining....much! A middle-aged couple with good careers, and who lived in an affluent area neighbourhood of the city, were called to become live in carers in a home for troubled boys in the Scottish countryside. It took this couple three years to decide to accept their calling.

The couple had compassion for these poor children, many of whom had never had a birthday party or been tucked into bed. Perhaps alluding to the passage, the leader of the home said that this Christian couple would bring light to children long accustomed to darkness. We may not all be called to that, but we are called to let go of our nets and follow Jesus.

Sometimes the nets we let go of are our jobs and careers, but we hold on tightly to other nets. I'm not sure what to say about James and John leaving their father in the boat. They left him to carry on the family business while they followed Jesus. I have known people who neglected their families for church work, and it was not always the best decision. I have known other people who found a way to balance their careers with church work and still spend time with their families. Taking care of our families can be our ministry. If family is your net, search your heart about what it means to follow Jesus.

One other net we hold on to is a feeling of inadequacy. *I can't do that; I can't contribute to the work of a committee; I wouldn't know where to begin.* It's true that we should seek out where we can serve most effectively, but God's call can stretch us in ways we hadn't expected. Another net we hold on to is a bad experience from the past. We tried a ministry and it didn't go well. We experienced deep frustration and we vowed never to try that again. Sometimes the mistakes of the past, are the building blocks of our later successes. Maybe God can work through the pain of past experience to bring real fruit from our next attempt.

When we let go of our nets, we carry on the ministry of Jesus. Verse 23 of this passage describes Jesus' ministry as teaching, proclaiming, and healing. We teach in Sunday school, in our cafes and in quiet conversations. We proclaim when we announce our faith to the world. We proclaim when we declare our values are not the same as the world's values. We are not ruled by money, success or prestige. We resist violence, greed and exploitation. We heal when we take care of one another in times of sickness, grief or trouble. We heal when we pray for one another.

We don't always know what will happen when we respond to God's call. We know that God is with us and that He will work through our ministries, even our shortcomings and incomplete successes. If God calls us, let us drop our nets and respond. Let us shine the light of God's dominion into the darkness of the world. *Amen.*

(1708 words)