

THE ALTERED ANGLER  
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church  
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Matthew 4:12-22

There's something that has always bothered me in this passage from Matthew. I bet it bothers you, too: Why did the disciples just drop everything and follow Jesus? What made them decide, on the spur of the moment, to leave their entire life behind and go after this person who came walking down the beach?

We're not the only people who have been bothered by it. Commentators through the years have had all sorts of speculation about what made them go. Many have said that, well, there must have been an earlier meeting of Jesus and these four that Matthew doesn't tell us about. Others say that Peter and the others had heard people talking about Jesus and followed out of curiosity. One of my favorite explanations comes from the esteemed William Barclay, who ought to know better. He says: "No doubt they felt Jesus' magic presence and the magnetism of his eyes."<sup>1</sup>

All of this may be interesting or not. The only problem is that Matthew's gospel doesn't say anything about an earlier meeting with Jesus, or people bringing reports to Peter and the others. And Matthew certainly doesn't say anything about magnetic eyes. There is no halo around Jesus' head to tip the disciples off, no wink that indicates that something special is going on. No—Jesus calls, they follow.

What Matthew does tell us, just before the call of these four disciples, is that Jesus goes out preaching. He even tells us what Jesus said: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." The very next words are the story of the call of these four disciples. The kingdom is announced, and people respond.

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*. The Daily Study Bible. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), p. 20.

Matthew isn't worried about telling us human motives for people following. Instead, this gospel is telling us about the kingdom. Those fishermen who jump up and follow Jesus are evidence of what Jesus had just said. The kingdom has come near. And what happens when the kingdom comes near? Why, just this: People are called and follow Jesus.

Someone<sup>2</sup> has said that it's like the creation story in Genesis. God announces light: "Let there be light," and light appears, just like that. The word makes it happen. So here: Jesus announces the kingdom, and immediately people start signing up to be kingdom people.

It happens in our world as well, where the word is spoken and a whole new thing occurs. Here is a wedding. The firm tempo of the processional music begins, and the groom and best man slink in by a side door to the front of the church. Assorted attendants and maids and flower persons and ring bearers make their way down the aisle. Then, as the music swells, the bride enters, resplendent as befits the occasion. The ceremony proceeds with questions to the couple, the vows, the exchange of rings, the prayer for the couple. And then come the most important words of all. They are the words everyone waits to hear: I now pronounce you husband and wife. They are not empty words; they do what they say. The word is spoken, and it is done. That word changes everything. Those two people entered as individuals, they depart as a married couple. All because that word is spoken—husband and wife.

Something like that happens here. The word is spoken: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven draws near." And guess what? It happens. Jesus proclaims it, and immediately people join up.

It sounds radical, and it is. Those disciples do what followers of Christ have always done: They leave the old life behind and go for that which is totally new. That is what it means to repent.

There's a lot of silly stuff said about repentance these days. People say that for there to be true repentance you've got to feel really, really bad. But repentance simply means that you turn around. You were going this way, and now you turn around and head in a new

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<sup>2</sup> Roy Harrisville, *Play on Your Harp*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1975), p. 31.

direction. You stop going away from Jesus, and now go in his direction. You follow Jesus.

That's not something that happens once. Repentance happens every day. Every morning we make the decision to give ourselves over to the Lordship of Christ. And every evening we find that once again there have been parts of ourselves that have not been brought under his Lordship. Lord, have mercy upon us. "Repentance is not the prelude to the Christian life, but the name of the game itself. To repent and to live the Christian life are the same thing."<sup>3</sup>

So it's radical, this call of Christ. It changes everything. But in another sense, the call of Christ continues the former life. Remember Jesus' famous words to the disciples? "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." They're still going to be fishermen. But now the object of their fishing is changed, no longer for fish in the Sea of Galilee, but now for humankind in the world.

We see it clearly in someone like the apostle Paul. Before Paul met Christ on the road to Damascus, what sort of person was he? Well, he was intelligent, religious, enthusiastic, maybe a little arrogant. And after he met Jesus, what sort of person was he? Well, he was intelligent, religious, enthusiastic, maybe a little arrogant—but now doing it for Christ. What changes for Paul is the direction in which he is living his life. And that changes everything.

Our church is planning to build a Habitat house this spring. It's a good thing to do. Habitat for Humanity is one of the great success stories of our generation as a way for people to help other people to combat homelessness.

Many years ago, when Habitat was just becoming known, I had the privilege of hearing Millard Fuller, who conceived the idea of Habitat, and guided it to become the organization it is today. Millard Fuller told our audience how he had come to get involved in this Christian organization. He said that as a young man growing up in Alabama he and his family were poor. He was determined that when he grew up he was going to make some money. He told us of the various get-rich-quick schemes he conjured up, and how, amazingly, he made money in some outlandish ways. He was so successful that he said that one day his bookkeeper walked into his office and said:

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<sup>3</sup> Leander Keck, *A Future for the Historical Jesus* (Nashville: Abingdon Press: 1971), p. 185.

“Congratulations, you are now a millionaire.” (This was back when a million dollars amounted to something.)

At the same time, though, Millard Fuller said that his personal life was falling apart. He had no life outside his business. His wife left him. He said that there was one weekend when he sat in his mansion alone and seriously considered taking his own life.

Somehow he clawed his way back to life, and met a man named Clarence Jordan, a minister and founder of the Koinonia community in Georgia. Jordan talked to Fuller about the Christian faith, and it made him a changed man. He was reconciled to his wife, and decided to use his talents for business in the service of Christ. And after awhile, the idea for Habitat was born.

Millard Fuller repented; he started going in a new direction. But he didn't stop being the person he was. He took his gifts—in his case a gift for business—and put it to work, no longer for the idol called Millard Fuller, but for the Lord named Christ.

What Jesus does when he calls is to take us right where we are. Are we good fishermen? Jesus will use that. Do we have certain talents? Jesus will transform those for his service. We keep using what we have and what we are. Only now, we've repented. We're going in a new direction. So we use what we have for Jesus.

Repent, says Jesus. The kingdom of heaven is drawing near. When we pray: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” we know that our prayer is already being answered. Christ is risen. He's out there in our world, waiting to call you to take what you have and what you are, and use them for his service.

It may not make your life easier to follow Christ. In fact, if anything it will make it more difficult. It doesn't settle things; it unsettles them.

Nevertheless, don't you envy those four—Peter and Andrew, James and John—as they walk down the beach leaving fish and boats and nets for the new life of Christ? And don't you, in the depths of your heart, want to go along?✠