

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas - January 26, 2020
What Does God's Call Feel Like?
Psalm 27:1, 4-7 and Matthew 4:12-23

Driving an automobile is the most dangerous activity that most of us engage in on a daily basis. This is because the cars that we drive are incredibly heavy and remarkably fast. Far too often, routine trips have life-changing consequences. Danger comes quickly, like a flash. Tires screech. The car swerves. Metal crumples. Glass shatters. Airbags deploy. And from that moment forward, our lives are altered.

Even when we are fortunate enough to survive a wreck, the memory is forever imprinted on our psyche. We remember the place. The scenario. The car that we were driving. We remember the fear that we felt in the moments before impact. We remember the worried expressions of loved ones who gathered at our bedside. We recall the sore muscles and the need for rest. And the next time that we're behind the wheel, the world suddenly feels more risky.

As a minister, I spend a lot of time thinking about life's juxtapositions. About the similarities and the gaps between the ancient and the modern, the routine and the extraordinary, the mundane and the spiritual. Whenever I hear a biblical story, my

brain tries to make sense of it. And this week, I have been deep in thought about those fishermen long ago, in a world before automobiles.

Surely, the most dangerous thing that they did each day was board a fishing vessel in search of catch. Since this was their profession, most days must have seemed routine. But when your life's work involves navigating a heavy vessel over unpredictable waters, is life ever really routine? A simple mistake could sink the boat, risking your life and the lives of your friends. And in the days before insurance, few things would have been more devastating to a fishing crew than a sunken vessel. Each day, the livelihoods of everyone on board was at stake.

There were countless other risks, as well. The crew worked cooperatively, for example, to pull a series of enormous ropes out of the water. Any fish that they ensnared only added to the weight. You likely know that captured fish do not go passively. They wriggle. They wrestle. They try to break free. All of this adds to the unpredictability.

The fishermen had a system. Each person had a role. But what if something went wrong? What about those times when a man held a fishing net improperly and

lost his finger in an instant? Those were the days when everything changed. Those were the days when a crew was reminded of life's inherent risks.

Many of the risks we face are situational. There's no malice involved. Accidents just happen. And yet, life is also risky because certain aspects of our existence cannot be adequately described with words like fate, luck, misfortune, or chance. This is where the church comes in - equipping us with the necessary language to address the ethical dilemmas in our world.

Accidents may happen in an instant. But other concerns are systemic. Human dilemmas are both ancient and modern. Just consider, for example, that portions of Isaiah's prophecy were written during the Babylonian exile. Or fast forward to the New Testament gospels recorded at the height of the Roman occupation. Each of these occasions, exile and occupation, "represent darkness at various levels. Whether it be the deprivation of freedom, imperial taxes, injustice, and inequality, or the imposition of alien gods, darkness hovered like a thick fog. The voices of Isaiah the prophet, John the Baptist, and Jesus penetrate the fog" and speak to those sitting in darkness like "a hopeful ray of light."¹

¹ Mark Abbott, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A, Volume 1*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 206.

Specifically, Matthew reminds us that “the kingdom of heaven has come near.” So near, in fact, that people could see, and hear, and touch the very embodiment of that kingdom in the person of Jesus. To trust in him is the beginning of discipleship. And to be his disciple is to recognize Jesus as the “light of the world that scatters the shadows.”²

In our second lesson this morning, Jesus’ presence is as sudden and as jarring as the unforeseen risks of the high seas. But this is no accident. “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 the prophets in the Hebrew Bible, it is intrusive and disruptive, calling them away from work and family.”³ God’s call, in other words, is inherently risky.

“Without a word, the fishermen leave their nets and follow Jesus... 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.

² Jennifer Moland-Kovash, *Christian Century*, January 15, 2020, 19.

³ M. Eugene Boring, *Matthew, The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary Volume VIII*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 1995), 171.

We are met here with Jesus' first miracle, the miracle of his powerful word that creates following, that makes disciples.”⁴

For the rest of their lives, the fishermen would remember the details of that first encounter. Because it marked the beginning of a new reality. That was the day when everything changed.

Today, “we choose to be present where [Jesus] is proclaimed and his words studied. We choose to read the Gospels and ponder their significance.”⁵ But at a deeper level we also come to recognize that “in our searching we were being sought.” For “the one whom we choose is the one who first chose us.”⁶ And here, in Matthew's Gospel, “all the initiative is with Jesus, the primary actor... Jesus comes to Simon and Andrew; they do not come to him. He sees them; they do not see him. He speaks; they do not.”⁷

When God's call arises, they see it, they feel it, and they lean into it with their whole being. Then, amid the unknowns and a multitude of inherent risks, they go out in search of fish. May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.

⁴ Boring, 169.

⁵ Douglas R.A. Hare, *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. Ed. James Luther Mays (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 30-31.

⁶ Hare, 31.

⁷ Boring, 169.