



GOODBYE NETS AND BOATS
SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 9: 1-4; MATTHEW 4: 12-23
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
January 22, 2017
The Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop, Pastor

In 1999 Eric and Phillipa Kempson decided to make a change in their lives.¹

They wanted out of the rat race. And they had fallen in love with the island of Lesbos while there on vacation.

They had dreams of a simple life. Eric, an artist, would carve things out of olive wood and sell boutique jewelry and carvings to vacationers.

They would have a quiet life—with their baby girl. And so they left their life in Windsor, England, they no doubt let go of many things—friends, possessions, home. And they built their life on the shores of Lesbos.

Fast-forward 17 years. What makes up an everyday for the Kempsons now?

Eric stands with his binoculars scanning the waters for the Coast Guard or for any sign of the flimsy buoys he can spot now with such precision. Phillipa coordinates food, clothing donations, and make shift camps. Their daughter, now 17, is back in the UK because of all the death threats that Eric and Phillipa receive on a regular basis. Far from the quiet life they had planned on for their family, Eric and Phillipa Kempson spend their days as fishers of people.

They actually enter the cold waters and fish out babies, pregnant women, old men, young men, children—people so desperate to find refuge from the warzones that use to be their homes, that they have risked everything to find a way to have a new life.

Vacationers on the beach in Lesbos literally occupy common space with Syrian refugees who kiss the ground and weep because such treacherous conditions are, they hope, behind them.

The Kempsons give these exhausted people apples and help them figure out where they can go from that shoreline. And the Kempsons are harassed and threatened by those who just want the refugees to go away.

“I will make you fish for people.”

4:18 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.

4:19 And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

4:20 Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

4:21 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.

4:22 Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

The most jarring word in this story is "immediately."

"Immediately?"

Just take that in for a minute.

A regular day and a stranger comes up and says, "Follow me." You don't know where you are going.

And IMMEDIATELY, you say goodbye to all you have known and follow.

This is Jesus' first miracle.

And there is no way for us to get our minds around it.

But, if not for IMMEDIATELY, you and I, we would not be sitting here together at listening for God's word, watching for Jesus' footsteps to follow in.

The church was born on that sandy shore with IMMEDIATELY.

There is a lot we do not know about this moment in time on the shores in Galilee.

Jesus has withdrawn—his friend John has been arrested. Jesus knew things were getting intense. He does not go into hiding—he goes to a new place and begins his public ministry.

His answer to the growing hostility and John's arrest was to go to a place full of strangers and reach out to heal old wounds—not just Jewish strangers, but Gentiles as well.

And he set up home place there—meaning, he really invested in the community—he did lots of healing, lots of speaking truth to power, lots of startling, compassionate things.

Echoes of Isaiah whisper to us that this move to Galilee, to the shore was Jesus' destiny. Matthew elicits the language from Isaiah 9 about Zebulun and Naphtali—the first two tribes of Israel's Northern Kingdom to be deported in the Assyrian occupation—something that happened probably around 700 years before Matthew is generating this gospel.

Matthew colors in this moment with messianic, indeed historic, significance: Jesus' restorative and startling arrival on the shore acknowledges generations of pain, oppression, and suffering. God's promise to liberate with the love that does not dominate, that does not oppress or harm, but that heals and transforms arrives on the shore.

Naphtali and Zebulun probably do not stir up much for you and me. Such displacement, such abuses of power, such devastating dominance seem far away from the every day lives most of us know here in Asheville, here in the USA.

But those wounds cry out from lands we call home, lands seized from first-nation peoples, lands worked and wealth generated by enslaved people, even lands seized in the city of Asheville for urban renewal well within the lifetimes of many sitting here today—those wounds are a part of our situation, a part of our history. And living alongside us in our community are displaced people, exiled people, people who are at risk of more forced removal, more insecurity, more unknown. Our failure to acknowledge or to truly feel that pain does not make those realities disappear. It just makes them fester.

When Jesus calls to us from the shore—he sees all of who we are—woundedness, culpability, obliviousness, fearfulness, denial, helplessness, waning hope, disoriented longings, wondering, languishing, false comfort, lethargy.

Perhaps the truth of Andrew's and Simon Peter's and James' and John's pain or longing or restlessness or woundedness was more unfiltered than ours when Jesus said follow me. Perhaps their lives were easier to walk away from than any of ours would be. We don't know.

There is much we do not know about this moment. So, much lost in the ether of time and stories shared across centuries and cultures and theological agendas.

The mystery of this moment is thick. It defies reason. And this mysterious, irrational, miracle gave birth to us.

There is one thing I think we can say with confidence about Andrew, Simon Peter, James, and John: they were not Presbyterian.

No committee meeting was called to discern the validity of Jesus' invitation.

No decently and in order packing of bags or squaring away of their affairs.

No polished social niceties of having cookies and punch to bid them farewell.

Immediately is not a word we hear uttered much around the Presbyterian universe.

In fact, immediately, may be a Presbyterian dirty word—it smacks of impulsivity, irrationality, emotion—it feels downright disorderly—and even worse chaotic—perhaps the worst nightmare of the Presbyterian way.

I will make you fish for people.

Jesus comes to them.

Jesus is at the door, on the shore, on the threshold. "I will make you fish for people."

Are you ready? Are we ready?

What are we ready to say goodbye to? What are we ready to risk?

What is our gut reaction, our spiritual muscle twitch when we see suffering around us, when we encounter injustice, when we come face to face with how our comfort is tangled up with the scarcity and inequity that defines lives all around us.

What comes out of our mouths when we are asked for the truth-when we are called to stake our lives on being a follower of this stranger on the shore, Jesus, the Christ.

When Phillipa Kempson is asked what she does when she sees a boat coming, she replies:

- *"Well, we've been doing this for two years because of where we live... you can't take your child to school and drive past women and children on the beach freezing and crying, so we would go with whatever we could find. We gave away our own clothes, whatever food we could afford to buy...As the conflict in Syria gained momentum, we went from one or two boats with 50 people and maybe a couple of kids every day to - in October 2015, there was 200 boats a day coming."*²

Our best-laid plans may be beautiful and all to the good. But we are called to immediately, too.

And this is growth edge for us Presbyterians. This is where we need some more practice. And this is where we might be most afraid.

I saw many of you yesterday at the Women’s March—peaceful protest is a sign of a healthy democracy, and it is good to see the strength of numbers around the world of people standing in solidarity around the pressing importance of human rights.

But make no mistake that moment on the shore in Galilee is about much more than a march. It is a about being called into a way of life—a way of being in the world, that stays engaged with the suffering and injustice of the world every single day.

We may be most afraid of what Jesus asks of us—especially the immediately part—because it isn’t convenient, it isn’t on the calendar for weeks in advance, and it isn’t comfortable.

What will be demanded of us? What will we have to leave behind?

Friends, it could be a lot, it could be more than we are willing to give up.

Jesus stands on the shoreline watching us go about our every day routines, and says drop your nets, leave your boats, I am going to make you fish for people.

He is calling us to be liberated from our own caution, our own hesitancy. To be the church in the world today, we must move out of our familiar—

The Kempsons wanted to sail away into the sunset, away from the rough and tumble world. Instead they were plunged into the deep impulse to respond to the suffering and violence that abusive power churns out.

You and I worship a God who says, “Follow me.”

You and I stand on the shoulders of those who did not flinch, those who did not hesitate to say goodbye nets, goodbye boats.

We are the heirs of the radical belief that the shadows of the past can be healed by a compelling stranger who appears on the shore and invites us to come with him on a path lit by love, a path cleared by the many feet who gave themselves to the magnetic pull of immediately—and the tide turned—and love has been on the move ever since.

Thanks be to God.

¹ “Greek island refugee crisis: local people and tourists rally round migrants,” The Guardian, July 9, 2015, Patrick Kingsley. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/08/greek-island-refugee-crisis-local-people-and-tourists-rally-round-migrants>

² Interview on NPR, Monday, January 17, 2017, “EU Declares Freezing Conditions In Greek Refugee Camps 'Untenable.’” <http://www.npr.org/2017/01/17/510204535/eu-declares-freezing-conditions-in-greek-refugee-camps-untenable>