

Sermon for January 22, 2023—“Risky Business”

Third Sunday after Epiphany, Year A—Texts: Isaiah 9:1-4; Matthew 4:12-23

Most fairy tales begin with the familiar phrase: “Once upon a time...” In doing so, they signal a mythical point of departure; the beginning of a great adventure. If Matthew had known this phrase, I suspect that he might’ve used it to introduce the calling of the first disciples. Especially since his version of this story begins with all the breathless anticipation of a fairy tale.

Each day Andrew and Simon, James and John wake before dawn. They’d walk down to the sea, unroll their fishing nets, and try their luck. This was their routine. Their livelihood. Yet when Jesus calls their lives are changed in an instant. **“Follow me,”** Jesus says to Andrew and Simon, **“and I will make you fishers of people.”** With a few words they are his. Then Jesus sets his sights on James and John. They too, like Andrew and Simon, literally drop everything, and follow Jesus. In the blink of an eye—immediately, Matthew makes a point of saying—they’re by Jesus’ side.

G. K. Chesterton may’ve had such moments in mind when he wrote, “An adventure—by its nature—is a thing that comes to us. It is thing that chooses us, not a thing that we choose.” Perhaps this is why everything happens so fast in this passage. No one can wait for the adventure to begin. Well, almost no one.

As I read this story, I found myself drawn to its only minor character. He appears at the very end, informing us that James and John were fishing that day with their father—Zebedee. Matthew leaves us with one final, backward glance: **“Immediately—they left the boat, and their father, and followed [Jesus].”**

Though I know it’s not the point of the passage, I can’t help wondering why Zebedee didn’t come along. Was it simply because he wasn’t invited? Maybe—but I like to think that **everyone’s** invited—don’t you? That each of us has the opportunity to respond to God’s grace in his or her own way—right? Assuming that’s true, and I think it is, Zebedee stands out as the one who **doesn’t** respond. While four spring to their feet—one hesitates. Four drop their nets. One isn’t quite ready to let go. Maybe there were others, but only Zebedee is mentioned by name.

Now, I’m not trying to pick on poor old Zebedee, but because of all the characters in this story, he’s the one I most relate to, and for lots of reasons. I mean—I’ve been known to sit back and mull things over. More to the point, I’ve been known to drag my feet. For one thing, it wasn’t until, I was in my early forties that I knew what I wanted to be when I grew up.

But Zebedee also reminds me that most days aren’t all that adventurous. The story of any given day doesn’t begin with, “Once upon a time.” And that’s because most days really aren’t that exciting. Sometimes we’re okay with that. We’re not always ready for adventure.

But even on our worst days—on our least exciting days—we’re still called to follow Jesus, or, at least, try to. But a good bit of the time we too drag our feet. Perhaps with Zebedee it has to do with the fact that he’s older than the others in this story. Perhaps he felt that doing something so rash and impulsive as running off to follow some itinerant rabbi is for the young and foolish. In this sense, Zebedee is a cautionary figure.

A reminder that when Christ calls—whenever Christ calls—we must follow. Because when Christ calls, he’s offering something extraordinary. At the same time, however, even as we accept his offer, we must also accept some measure of risk. One writer noted that, “Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the end of safety.”

Personal growth, especially personal **spiritual** growth—at any age—implies change, and change suggests risk. That’s hard. We cling to the familiar: to the behaviors and beliefs that make us feel safe; that which we’ve worked most of our lives to develop. The psychological term for this is “attachment” and the implication is that what makes us feel safe, may also place us at risk.

As a result, we remain tethered to something known; that is, we cling to something safe, reluctant to move forward—if not dead set against it. We hold ourselves back from what we’re meant to be. The great irony here is that—as a culture—we’re fascinated with risk-taking.

Think about it: things like NASCAR racing, extreme sports, are incredibly popular—more than they’ve ever been. Even more popular are casinos. As of 2021, there are close to a thousand casinos in the US—eleven in Ohio, half of those in the greater Cincinnati area. Then there’s the lottery in forty-eight states and US territories. All of these pull in, an enormous amount of money, staggering amounts, in the billions. And now, of course, sports betting is now legal here in Ohio.

Now—my point isn’t that gambling is bad. Not as long as it’s done responsibly. No—it’s not that it’s bad—but that it’s so popular!

This tells me that—as a culture—we’re really not all that risk averse. Those who disagree, or say that they’re not gamblers, let me ask: Do you own stock? Investments of any kind? Who’s ever said, while driving, I can make that yellow light? Who’s looked at *The Beast* at King’s Island, and said: “Looks safe to me.” Seriously, think about it: Every time we leave our homes, or get in our cars, we’re gambling. We gamble all the time. All. The. Time. Let’s face it—life is risky!

So what about faith? What risks have we taken? Individually? As a church?

Let me put it this way: it seems to me that when we’re younger we’re more likely to take risks. But as we get older, myself included, we learn to play it safe. We trust a good job with a steady salary, benefits, and a retirement plan. We buy car insurance. Life insurance. Mitigating risk as much as possible, we choose prudence over adventure. But what often happens? So many find themselves trapped in their safe homes secure in comfort zones insulated from what we perceive to be the dangers of the world.

Henry David Thoreau wrote that, “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” He was right. Our need to explore—to learn—fades, our sense of adventure, becomes stifled. We settle for ordinary, mundane lives, especially when it comes to faith. Even the adventure of finding out what incredible things God might have in store for us.

Sure, we may go on a mission trip, or take on a mission project that may challenge us physically, but spiritually—not so much. We cling tightly to what we learned when we were younger, back in the good ol days when Sunday School rooms were packed, never ever stopping to consider that there might be more to know—that there might be a fresher, more meaningful perspective, a deeper understanding that causes us to stop and think, and—heaven forbid—ask questions!

We ask ourselves, now that we're older, what's the point? We echo the words of the teacher in the Book of Ecclesiastes, "**What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done. There is nothing new under the sun.**" We tell ourselves that, "...**all is vanity and a chasing after wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge, increase sorrow.**"

I guess this is why so few people, outside of Sunday morning worship, take the time to read, let alone study the Bible, don't devote too much time to prayer, or bother to get more involved in the church. They might say, "been there—done that!" They might say that they have no time—but I don't think that's really it.

No, what I think's going on—that is, that why so few people risk going deeper in their faith—is that they're afraid of what they might learn, or discover about themselves, or about God. Truths avoided. Lies exposed. Worldviews obliterated. Carefully crafted narratives shot full of holes. Something that might change them.

And make no mistake—when we study the bible diligently, when we pray honestly and openly, when we commit ourselves to discipleship whole-heartedly—we **will** be changed. These things are **meant** to change us. This bothers people. Sometimes, I get it. Sometimes I don't. I mean, what if we find out that we've been wrong about God, or about ourselves? What do think will happen? What is it we fear?

Well, for starters—failure! Then too, we're afraid that if someone finds out who we really are they'll reject us. The same goes for God! For some it's too much. Their self-esteem cannot take yet another hit. The price is just too high. We've too much invested in the status quo, so we avoid going deeper. And where does that lead us? Well, one theologian writes: "I've found that deep faith isn't possible without substantial risk, and that faith without risk eventually leads to emptiness."

Emptiness. Does that strike a chord with anyone? Be honest.

Over the years, I've met many people, too afraid to go deeper in their faith. Ironically, a lot of them believed that to do so—that is, to ask questions, to wrestle with one's faith meant a **lack** of faith. They felt they were being **unfaithful**.

Others, simply believed that they'd already figured everything out. They saw no need to go any deeper. Sorry, but that's just wrong, more to the point it's arrogant. Whichever the case, their faith remains shallow. Hollow. Untested. Unfortunately—far too often—something happens; a crisis of one kind or another occurs. They—or someone they know—gets sick. Someone close to them dies, and the faith they thought they had all figured out, the faith to which they'd clung so tightly—but that they'd never had to actually lean on—collapsed like a house of cards, folded like a cheap suit.

Folks, spiritual maturity is a life-long endeavor. It takes commitment to dare, risk, trust, and grow. It takes courage to find **real** answers to life's hardest questions, to weather life's toughest storms. The disciples in today's gospel reading risked everything to follow Christ. They walked away from jobs and family, from life as they knew it. So have many others throughout history.

Martin Luther, a risk-taker, if there ever was one wrote, "Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times."

What about us? Think about it. I mean, things like risk, adventure, danger—these aren't things we normally associate with faith. But in reality, the explorer and the believer are both walking the same path. The life of faith **is** a daring adventure. It's risky business. The way is different for everyone, but brothers and sisters—here's the thing:

It's here and **only** here on the precipice—between the comfortable, and the unknown—that faith will **truly** thrive and deepen. Only here will you discover the truth, the truth that the more you risk, trusting in God, the closer you'll find yourself to God's heart, and the safer you'll become.

Thanks be to God. Amen and Amen.