

Sermon for January 22, 2017 – “Adventure Time”

Westwood First Presbyterian Church

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Third Sunday after Epiphany, Year A – Text: 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. 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 (Peter), literally drop everything and follow Jesus. In the blink of an eye (immediately, Matthew makes a point of saying), they’re by Jesus’ side, wide-eyed and dripping wet from the Sea of Galilee.

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 just before the curtain falls. 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? 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 in this passage 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. Granted, there were probably others within earshot, people who’d heard and also failed to respond, but only Zebedee is mentioned by name. Now, I’m not saying this to pick on poor old Zebedee. I say this because out of all the characters in this story, he’s the one I most relate to. 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 40’s that I knew what I wanted to be when I grew up. 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 on our worst days, least exciting days, we’re still following Jesus or, at least, trying to. But we’re also, a good bit of the time, dragging our feet. In this sense, Zebedee is a cautionary figure. A reminder that when Christ calls we must follow. Because when Christ calls, He’s offering abundant life.

At the same time, when we’re to 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.” Growth, especially spiritual growth, implies change; and change suggests risk. Certainly, for a lot of folks change is 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”. The word comes from old European roots which mean, somewhat ironically, “staked” or “nailed to.”

It implies that what makes us feel safe may also place us in peril. As a result, we remain tethered to something known. We cling to something safe. Reluctant to move forward, if not downright dead set against it. We hold ourselves back from what we were meant to become. Even when the Son of God shows up.

Of course, we don't know what happened to Zebedee. How he may've responded the next time Jesus called. We do know that despite their initial enthusiasm Peter, James, and John were far from perfect followers. One theologian speculates that Jesus' disciples must've experienced some ambivalence after His death. He writes: "...what a relief it must have been when the stone was rolled across the entrance of the tomb, sealing everything shut...so they could go back to being fishermen which they knew how to do rather than fishers of men, which they didn't."

The resurrection was another disruption, but it was also another invitation. The reality is that Christ calls countless times throughout our lives, our entire lives. No matter how we've responded previously, the adventure's never over. Sometimes we're up to the task, sometimes not. But, when Christ calls He beckons us beyond the point of familiarity. He asks us to risk doing something we don't know how to do, to become someone that we're not yet sure we know how to be. The great irony here is that as a culture we've become fascinated with risk-taking. Think about it...Extreme sports, NASCAR, things like this have never been as popular as they are now. Studies have shown that most people watch NASCAR to see the crashes! And do you want to talk about risk-taking...There are close to 2,500 casinos nationwide. Their total revenues are over \$24 trillion. There are 43 state-run lotteries with revenues over \$18 **trillion**. There are, what, 8 to 9 casinos/racetracks within an hour or so of here. My point isn't to say that they're bad, but that they're **popular**! And that, as a culture, we're really not all that risk averse. Those who disagree, those who say that they don't gamble let me ask you...Do you have money in the stock market? Who's ever said while driving, I can make that yellow light? Seriously, think about it. Every time we leave our homes or get in our cars we're gambling with some fairly high stakes. When we buy something we gamble on whether it'll work or not, whether it'll meet a particular need. We make decisions numerous times a day; some big, some small. Each involves some degree of risk. We gamble all the time. But what about when it comes to faith? What risks have we taken? Either individually, or as a church?

There's a book with the title "A Dangerous Faith". It tells the stories of people who've taken risks for the gospel. It reminds us that when we're younger we've a natural inclination to explore, to find out more about the world around us. But as we as we grow up we learn to play it safe, putting our trust in a steady salary, a retirement plan, good insurance. We choose prudence over adventure and what often happens? We find ourselves trapped in our comfort zones, settling for superficial friendships, passionless careers, mundane lives.

Thoreau wrote that "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation..." He was right. Our need to explore, to learn. Our sense of adventure becomes stifled, even the adventure of discovering the life God has created us for. I think that's why so few people involve themselves in bible study or spend much time in pursuing spiritual disciplines like prayer and why they won't get more involved in the church. They might say they don't have the time but I don't think that's really it. No, what I think's going on, why I think so many people are so reluctant to go deeper in their faith is that they're afraid of what they might learn or discover. Some truth about themselves that they'd just as soon not realize. Something that will change them. And make no mistake, if you study the bible diligently, if you pray honestly and openly, if you commit yourselves to mission/ministry whole-heartedly, You **will** be changed.

These things are meant to change us. This bothers people. Sometimes, I get it...Sometimes I don't. I mean, heaven forbid we find that we've been wrong about God, for all these years or about how we've lived our lives. For some it's too much. The price is just too high. We've too much invested in the status quo so we don't let God surprise us. And where does that lead us? Jim Lund writes, "I've found that deep faith isn't possible without substantial risk, and that faith without risk eventually leads to emptiness." Emptiness. That strike a chord with anyone? Be honest... Over the years, I've met a good many people who've been too afraid to go deeper into their faith. People who've stopped attending bible studies, if they ever attended them to begin with. People who've spent less time in prayer and devotional time. For some, the reason why is because, ironically, they believed asking questions, going deeper, wrestling with faith, meant a **lack** of faith. They felt they were being unfaithful. For others, it was because they felt that they'd figured it out already and saw no real reason to go any further.

What happens far too often unfortunately is that a crisis of one kind or another occurs. They or someone they know gets sick, someone close to them dies, and that faith they thought they'd had all figured out, the faith they'd clung so tightly to, went and folded like a cheap suit. So, yes, it takes a commitment to dare, risk, trust, and grow, to find **REAL** answers to the **hard** questions we all confront.

Are we capable of going where others fear to tread? I ask because only our willingness to risk enables us to forge the kind of faith that can weather any storm. Only our willingness to risk enables us to discover God's gifts to us. Love, a sense of being fully alive, forgiveness, hope, and meaning. We're all born with that sense of curiosity. An instinctive need to learn and grow and discover. It's one of God's gifts. Sadly, most of us grow out of it. We become analytical, judgmental, protective. We fear what failure will do to us or make us look like to others. Never mind that failure is one of our greatest teachers.

Brothers and sisters, God created us with this innate desire to risk. It's what makes us grow, spiritually and otherwise. Taking risks for His sake brings Him glory. Risk. Adventure. Danger. We don't often associate those words with a devout faith. But the reality is that the explorer and the believer both walk the same path. The life of faith is a daring adventure, full of risk and danger. Jesus said: "Risk your life and get more than you ever dreamed of". "Play it safe and end up holding the bag." The disciples in today's gospel reading risked everything to follow Christ. They walked away from jobs and family. So have many others throughout the history of the Church. Martin Luther, no stranger to risking it all for faith, 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? Do we seriously believe that our understanding of God can ever be complete? There's more, so very much more to know and experience. Serious musicians, even those with years of experience, still practice. They still strive to become better. The great jazz sax player John Coltrane would practice in the men's room between sets. He'd even practice during sets when others were soloing. He knew he could always get better. Do we seriously believe our faith is any different? Do we believe we've gone as far as we can in our relationship with Christ?

I hate to have to say this, but we're called to pursue a dangerous faith. We're called to live every thought, idea, action, every moment, at risk for the Lord. It may mean speaking up when you'd rather remain silent. It may mean taking a stand on something to preserve your integrity, even at great personal cost. It may involve questioning or wrestling with long-held beliefs. It may involve taking a different course in life.

I had the privilege of knowing a 79-year-old woman in seminary. My point is that it's different for everyone. But here's the thing, and this is crucial, so please hear me...It's here and **only** here on the precipice between the comfortable and the unknown, it's only here that faith will **truly** thrive and deepen. Only here will you discover the ironic truth. The more you risk and trust God, the closer you move to His heart and the safer you become. Steven Curtis Chapman wrote a song called, "The Great Adventure." In it, he encourages us to:

Saddle up your horses; we've got a trail to blaze,
Through the wild blue yonder, of God's amazing grace.

Let's follow our Leader, into the glorious unknown.
This is a life like no other. This is the great adventure.

Indeed.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and Amen.