

A 3 Epiphany 2026
Saint Barnabas's Church, Falmouth MA
The Rev. David Rider
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Matthew 4: 12-23

As we say our prayers this morning amid cultural chaos and a winter's stormy blast, today's Gospel provides the turning point at which Jesus begins to proclaim a kingdom of God that has come near

With a motley cast of characters Jesus calls together disciples that will witness to his teaching, preaching and healing ministry:

Six fishermen with attitude issues whose work/life balance included ditching their father Zebedee on short notice; a skeptic and hard-core, high-maintenance doubter; a hated tax collector, an untrustworthy zealot and—best of all—a traitor who stabs him in the back eventually join the team

With action-packed verbs, Jesus challenges these characters to 'follow me,' and immediately they left their nets and followed him

In our individual lives and as a parish family, should we, too, drop what we are doing, embrace edgy risks and seek out a kingdom that is drawing near?

Matthew's gospel story inspires us, and yet it begins on an anxious note, proving that anxiety and inspiration can merge as first cousins

Matthew begins this story by disclosing John's arrest—no details, but a tough realty—an arrest that seemingly causes Jesus to change venues from Nazareth to Capernaum

Jesus made his home in Capernaum, a small agricultural and fishing village on the NW corner of the Sea of Galilee, far humbler than the more exotic nearby towns of Tiberias or Sepphoris

By the choice of Capernaum and his selection of disciples, we witness Jesus' intentional decision to identify with marginal, vulnerable people over sophisticated urban elites

Note that Simon Peter and Andrew bring no religious credentials to their call by Jesus

We find no suggestion that Simon Peter and Andrew are particularly holy or virtuous, their families have not given money to the synagogue or accomplished anything to deserve special status

In fact, you might argue that they embody nothing more than raw, primordial material through which God works to become faithful witnesses to God's reign breaking into this world

But their marching orders certainly sound exotic: they will not be tenders of aquariums but, rather, fishers of people

Think of Saint Barnabas's Church as a human continuum from raw, primordial material for God's use on one end and finished product on another end

I suspect that most of us, given our ages and stature in the community, think of ourselves more as finished product than raw, primordial material

I have multiple' degrees, I have been evaluated, knocked around, challenges, supported, mentored, retooled, socialized, promoted, credentialed, defeated, and stretched

I like to think that I know who I am, what I want and even—when I'm honest with myself—my failings and dislikes

Yet Jesus comes into their lives and challenges them to mix it up, to leave behind their known rhythms as fishermen, and to live boldly into a new venture

Their only promised reward is to experience a kingdom that is drawing near

With our busy schedules and important commitments, however, it can be tempting to say that we don't have time to be made over, stirred up or transformed—keep it simple, don't make big demands, inspire me in small ways and dream small dreams, because I don't have time for the big stuff

In church circles, this conundrum becomes the recipe for what we sometimes call maintenance religion

Maintenance religion serves the needs of those born into the faith, whose exciting transformations are behind them—if they ever happened at all—and who desire more buffing than remaking

Small dreams get dreamed, and Jesus provides a spiritual insurance policy against the rare catastrophes of life

Although I do not include our parish among them, any church conflict consultant knows that parishes get into trouble when they become bored, ingrown and unfocused—when they morph from being fishers of men into tenders of aquariums

Is Saint Barnabas's Church a 'finished product' demanding to be nurtured, or do we represent primordial mass waiting to be shaped by God for divine service?

I hope we find ourselves somewhere in between, both as individuals and as a parish community

I have had the honor of serving as an interim priest in large and small parishes on six earlier occasions of my ministry

In each of these settings—and definitely here at StB's—a theme invariably arises, whether it's in one-to-one or group discussion: do we want a soothing rector with good people skills, or do we want someone who will challenge us, even if we need to break some eggs to make an omelet?

In my own mind, I usually try to reframe it just a bit: should we call a club chaplain to bless the hounds, or is God calling a dynamic servant leader to stretch us and grow us into a community of holy transformation?

Of course, this issue is not a binary Yes/No choice but a continuum that winds its way through annual meeting conversations, including—I predict, the discussion we postponed from today until next Sunday

Are we dreaming small dreams or exotic dreams for God's using us for holy purposes?

What does it mean that God's kingdom is drawing near?

Our Annual Meeting, now spread over two Sundays, gives us another opportunity for reflection on who we have been and are becoming

To become a fisherman means that we must dive deep and—like Captain Ahab—occasionally sink a hook into the big one that takes us for the ride of our lives

Both historically and today, Woods Hole is home to researchers who drive the Alvin to the deepest bottoms of the sea, Coast Guard professionals who rescue recreational boaters in over their heads, and fishermen who string together a livelihood one catch at a time

Do we want Saint Barnabas's to serve its own or provide radical hospitality for the broken, spiritually disheveled seeker of God's grace?

How do we celebrate life's joys and bear each others' burdens as we learn to listen more deeply—remember, 'obedience' comes from the Latin *obidire* for 'listen'—to God's kingdom breaking into our lives

We can defend ourselves against life's chaos with a few totem prayers, or we can dive more deeply and trust that God will sustain us on our best and worst days

Jesus beckons: come with me, and I will make you fishers of others, serving as beacons of God's mercy in a wonderful yet dangerous world

I invite you to keep these questions at heart

I cannot think of a single phrase of Scripture in which Jesus becomes domesticated or bored with mission

In our many small-group discussions, it's been heartening to hear fellow parishioners open up with their deeper longings to understand how our human souls navigate a deeper, more faithful journey on both sides of the grave

Jesus calls Simon Peter and Andrew to lead passionate lives, even at the risk of abandoning poor Zebedee, who gets left holding the nets of the old life

Jesus reminds us that God's kingdom is at hand, if not fully in hand

Jesus challenges us to repent and live a new way, full of risk and passion, so that we might proclaim, heal and reconcile a broken world

I pray that we view everything we do here as a means to the end, the end of following Christ—with all our hearts, and minds, and souls—as the action packed, thrilling journey of a lifetime