

## **“Hey, You! Follow Me!”**

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Matthew 4:12-23

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The story of the disciples who followed Jesus really begins here, along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee, for any of you who might not know, is a large freshwater lake in what is now northern Israel. It is nowhere near as large as any of our Great Lakes, but for that part of the world, it's pretty big: 13 miles long from north to south, and 8 miles wide at its widest point east to west. Its entire surface area is about 64 square miles – making it easily visible from space – and if you were to take a hike all the way around it, you would cover about 33 miles. It is about 140 feet deep at its deepest point. Water flows into the Sea of Galilee from the north, flowing down from mountains in northern Israel and Lebanon. Water flows out of the Sea of Galilee to the south, forming the main part of the Jordan River, which empties into the Dead Sea, about 65 miles to the south. The Dead Sea is extremely salty – about ten times more salty than ocean water – so salty that no fish or plants can live in it. The Sea of Galilee, on the other hand, is a beautiful lake, with marvelous sunrises and sunsets, teeming with life. Reeds grow along most of the shoreline. Birdwatchers can have a field day here, with all the gulls, pelicans, cranes, storks, herons, and even eagles to watch. There are 19 different species of fish native to the Sea of Galilee, including several different kinds of tilapia, sardines, and catfish. Tons of fish – tons upon tons! – are caught by fishermen every year on the Sea of Galilee. It's been that way for a very long time.

In the time of Jesus there were about a dozen towns and villages situated around the perimeter of the Sea of Galilee. There was Tiberias, a Roman city and the capital of the province of Galilee; and Magdala, a small Jewish city, presumably the birthplace of Mary Magdalene (Mary of Magdala); and Capernaum, a Jewish fishing village, with a population of about 1500 people; to name just a few. A fair amount of the early ministry of Jesus took place in and around Capernaum, and it is very likely that the fishermen named in today's story all lived in Capernaum. There are five of them: Simon, who was later called Peter, and his brother Andrew; and the brothers James and John, and their father Zebedee.

Matthew tells us that Jesus “left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea.” He had been raised in Nazareth, and had spent his adulthood there as well, up until his baptism. Then he moves to Capernaum, which was about 20 miles away in a straight line. Realistically, the path that Jesus traveled to get there would have been more like 25 to 30 miles. Today there is what's called “The Jesus Trail,” a 40-mile hiking trail that connects important points between Nazareth and Capernaum, including the village of Cana (where Jesus performed his first miracle), Tabgah (probably the site of the feeding of the five thousand), the Mount of Beatitudes (probably the site of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount), and more. If you are ever in Israel and you enjoy hiking, this is one you don't want to miss!

What compelled Jesus to move to Capernaum at the start of his ministry? That's a good question, and we don't know the answer – although Matthew does indicate that this was a fulfillment of prophecy: “he will make glorious the way *of the sea*,” Isaiah had said, many centuries earlier. According to Matthew, everything significant that happens in the life of Jesus is a fulfillment of prophecy; Matthew keeps telling us that, over and over again throughout his gospel. On a practical level, perhaps Jesus knew that the people he wanted to become his disciples weren't to be found in his hometown of Nazareth, where everybody knew him, but in this fishing village, where he's a stranger. If Jesus wanted these fishermen to follow him, he needed to go to them. They certainly weren't going to come to him! This was their home; this was where they worked for a living; this was where Simon had a wife and where he may have been wanting to raise a family. We don't know her name; we just know that Simon had a mother-in-law (Jesus heals her later on), so therefore Simon must have been married. Day after day, Simon and his companions went out to fish on the Sea of Galilee; day after day they sold what they caught and brought the proceeds home. That was their livelihood. That was what paid the bills.

So there they are, on the Sea of Galilee, on what was probably a very fine day. The average temperature in the heat of summer is about 88 degrees, and the average temperature in the deep of winter is 57 degrees – which we would consider pretty balmy right about now! Simon and Andrew are fishing, on or near the shore; James and John and their dad are fishing in their own boat, not far away. Their boats would have looked something like this. This is the remains of a 2000-year-old fishing boat that was found in 1986 along the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee – precisely where these fishermen would have been fishing. This boat is 27 feet long and 7.5 feet wide – big enough to hold a handful of people, and a lot of fish. It is called “the Jesus Boat,” since it comes from the time of Jesus, more-or-less, though of course we don't know if Jesus ever sat in this particular boat. This boat is now on display in a climate-controlled museum, open to the public, in a town along the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee.

The five fishermen would have been using fishing nets that looked something like this. It's a reasonably big net, with weights around the edges. You throw it out onto the water, flat. The weights start to pull the net down, so whatever is under the net starts to get enveloped. Then you pull on a cord, and it tightens, enveloping the fish that are under the net. You haul the net back to your boat, you empty the fish into your boat, and you throw it out again. And you just keep doing that. Periodically, you have to stop to clean out any gunk that's accumulated in there, or to mend any rips and tears. Fishing with nets tends to work better at nighttime, when the fish are closer to the surface of the water, which is why Gospels occasionally say that the disciples fished all night and stopped in the morning.

So there they are. Five fisherman, two boats, some nets, some fish ... and one Jesus. One Jesus, who comes walking along the shoreline. He had already started proclaiming a message of repentance, identical to the message John the Baptist had been proclaiming earlier, some distance to the south: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” John had been saying those words; now they are coming from the lips of Jesus. And now Jesus, like John before him, begins gathering followers. He begins with four of these five men. Simon and Andrew, James and John – Jesus has set his sights on *you*.

“Follow me,” he says to these fishermen. “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” The way Matthew tells the story (in Greek), it's just eight words. Eight words that will change these men's lives forever. Perhaps there were more words than that; maybe Matthew is giving us an abbreviated version of what happened there – but whatever Jesus said, it was enough. “Immediately they left their nets and followed him.” *Immediately* they left their nets and followed him. This was a more-or-less

instantaneous decision. They didn't take a day or two to think about it. They didn't spend much time considering the economic ramifications. Simon didn't even go home to discuss it with his wife! Remember, fishing was their livelihood. Fishing is what paid the bills! But Jesus comes along and says "Follow me," and they follow. All four of them. Whatever exactly he said to them, it was enough!

Imagine. Imagine that you're young, and married, maybe wanting to start a family. Imagine that you're doing what you know how to do – the *only* thing you know how to do – to bring home income for your household. To put food on the table. You're not rich; you don't have a lot of money sitting in the bank or in an investment account. Your spouse is *depending* on you bringing home an income. Then one day, something happens, someone says something to you, that makes you *stop caring* about all that. Someone says something so *powerful*, so *compelling*, so *life-changing* that money just *doesn't matter* as much anymore. You suddenly see everything differently; you realize that there's something *more* you need to be doing. You've discovered a far greater treasure. A far different *purpose*.

It takes a lot of *courage* to make a change like that. To step out into the unknown. To risk following a *complete stranger*. Of course, if it doesn't work out, you can always go back to your fishing. At least, Simon and Andrew and James and John could do that. They were, shall we say, "self-employed;" they weren't on anybody's payroll; they didn't have to turn in notice to an employer. They still owned their boats and their nets. But still ... this was an act of enormous *courage*. To give up what was known, what was *comfortable*, and step out into the unknown. What was this man going to teach them? What would he *ask* of them? Did they have *any idea* what they were getting themselves into?

Simon, in particular, has a remarkable road ahead of him. Jesus is going to give him a new name. Jesus is going to help him walk on water, and give him the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is going to give him the power to do remarkable, even *miraculous*, things. Eventually, Simon will heal a man who was lame from birth (Acts 3:1-11); he will heal a man who was paralyzed and bedridden for eight years (Acts 9:32-35); he will even *bring a dead woman back to life* (Acts 9:36-43). Eventually, Simon is going to be given a remarkable power of *speech*, a power of *persuasion*, the ability to bring *thousands* of people to faith with just one speech (Acts 2). At this point, there on the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee, he doesn't know any of that. Nor does he know what *pains* he will experience along the way. He doesn't know how he will let Jesus down, how he will *lie about knowing Jesus* three times, how he is going to value his *own* life more than Jesus's, at that critical moment when everything was at stake. Simon doesn't know that he will be arrested at least three times (Acts 4:3; 5:18; 12:3-19). He doesn't know that James, his fellow fisherman just a little ways down the shore, is going to be executed by order of a king (Acts 12:1-2). And Simon doesn't know that he, too, will ultimately wind up on the execution block, crucified, on order of a Roman emperor (Emperor Nero, according to a later Christian tradition). Would Simon have made the same choice if he could have known all this ahead of time? Would you?

That's the question, isn't it? When Jesus says, "Follow me," *are you actually willing to do it?* Are you willing to let go of what is *comfortable* and step out into the *unknown*? Would you even *consider* it? How much do you want to cling to your familiar life that you have built? Does it make a difference how *old* you are? Is it easier to say "yes" to do what Jesus asks when you're younger than when you're older? Maybe you've already made some major decisions to follow Jesus. But what if Jesus showed up in your life *right now*, saying he's got a *new* task he wants you to do? One that will require *giving up something significant in your life*? *What would you say?* "I don't know, I've got a good life right now, I know where my next meal is coming from?" Or ... "Okay, Jesus, tell me what you want me to do, and I'll do it, *no matter what*." What would you really *do*? And is there something Jesus is asking you to do *right now*?

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