

3rd Sunday after the Epiphany
January 27th, 2008
Matthew 4:12-23

Preacher: The Rev. Robert K. Marshall

Take the Water to the Fish

Some of you may have already forgotten how dry it was here in Southwestern Virginia this past fall. Rocks which had been hidden beneath the waters of our creeks and rivers for months, and in some cases years, began poking their heads forth and drying in the autumn sun. Some smaller creek beds dried up altogether.

In October I went on a fly-fishing trip to Monterey Virginia with Bip Fauber, Dave Petty, and Bip's Son-in-Law Tom Hicks. We caught a few trout in the stocked ponds that were on the property where we were staying, but we decided to venture over to the Jackson River on our second day to see if we could hook some more legitimate fish. On our way, we had to drop off some trash at an area dumpster. Since Bip never passes up an opportunity to engage a total stranger in conversation, he told the man working at the dumpster site that we were headed out to do a little fishin' on the Jackson River...to which the man responded, "Well what are you gonna do, take the water to the fish?"

Well, we hadn't thought of that...taking the water to the fish. Obviously fish need water to live so it made sense, but we weren't driving

around with barrels of water in the back of the car so our luck on the Jackson was not so good.

The Gospel lesson we hear this morning, Matthew's account of the beginning of Jesus' ministry, includes a fishing story of sorts. It begins however with Matthew making the connection of the beginning of Jesus' ministry to what he feels is proof of his being the messiah. John the Baptist, who was to pave the way for the messiah, has been removed from the scene. Jesus does not begin a ministry that will compete with John's. John has been arrested, so Jesus' ministry, the ministry of the messiah, becomes THE one that is offered without any potentially confusing competitive voices.

We are also told that Jesus' very presence in the seaside community of Capernaum fulfills what the prophet Isaiah said about the messiah, referring to him as a great light in that land...a specific part of the land to which God told Isaiah the messiah would go.

You see, Matthew is a good Jew who knows the Old Testament scripture...speaking to good Jews who know the Old Testament scripture. He is attempting to put them in a place of comfort and familiarity in order to make the connection to the messiah. He is hoping that if these folks can swim around in the familiar waters of the Torah scriptures they may be

caught by the Gospel message. In a sense, he is attempting to bring the water to the fish...new water.

Matthew tells us that Jesus' ministry begins with a command and an announcement. The announcement is that the kingdom of heaven has come near. It is an announcement that is not just a present moment announcement, but one that casts a line back to the same announcement made by John about Jesus' coming, and one that casts a line toward the future promise of heaven and earth someday being made one. The kingdom of heaven, which was thought of as completely separated from earth, has broken through the barrier. In Jesus' very presence, the kingdom of heaven has broken into the earthly realm to change things...forever.

So how does one honor that announcement? Jesus says, "Repent". In Matthew's Greek the word literally means, "Change one's mind". It is not meant to invoke feelings of sorrow, remorse, or guilt...but rather a change in the direction of one's life. A returning to God and the familiar waters of the kingdom God intends for all. Jesus, the messiah, the Son of God who is breaking through the barrier to bring the kingdom to earth is in a sense bringing the water to the fish.

And isn't it ironic that the first people to whom he brings that water are those who fish for a living? We are told that the first disciples called are

not only fishermen, but are also brothers and sons. Jesus brings them two words as a means of becoming disciples...Follow me. Their reaction is to drop their nets, drop their vocation, leave their families, and follow. Jesus' words, The very Word of God, is all it takes.

You see, The Word of God that is brought to all disciples by Jesus is the water...new water; it is life, true life. It is the kingdom of heaven being brought to all of God's creatures on earth so they may truly live.

But to look at the reaction of these first disciples and think about what that means for those of us who say we want to be disciples is perhaps a little scary. Does this call from Jesus to follow threaten our ties to family and create conflict with our occupations? Well, in a way, Yes. But remember what I said about the original meaning of the word repent? To change one's mind...to change the direction of one's life. You may not be asked to leave your family entirely, but perhaps to view family in a completely new way. The kingdom of heaven doesn't exist to serve the family; the family exists to serve the kingdom of heaven. THAT can certainly be a change of mind, a change in thinking, a change in our way of life. In the same way, the goal of the kingdom of heaven is not to serve us in being more effective in our jobs. Our work is truly effective when it serves to express the will of God.

You see, if we are truly listening to the Word of God, the call of Jesus, we can begin to recognize that all of the current patterns of our lives are not made more secure by the kingdom of heaven and unaffected...but rather the kingdom is meant to transform them. Jesus does not come, breaking in with the new water of the kingdom to destroy family and work, but to renew, refocus, and refresh.

Ironically, our first encounter with such a renewal is in the water. Our baptism in the water is meant to be a symbol of God giving us renewed life, life in the kingdom. God brings the water of baptism to us the fish, so that we may discover true life.

But Jesus says he will make the disciples fishers of people. How are we to do that today without appearing to be manipulative? Well, *true* evangelism is not manipulative at all. True evangelism calls us to present the fly as best we can, and then hand the fishing pole to God so God might do the catching. Be prepared though...God is going to throw all those fish back...but not before God gets down in the water and changes it forever. We must always remember, water is life for us fish...and it is God who brings the water to the fish.