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Sermon
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Park Congregational Church
Worcester, Massachusetts

“The *Kairos* Moment”

Scripture Text: Matthew 4:12-23

Dear people of God, an amazing discovery was made in 1986 on the Sea of Galilee. Israeli brothers Moshe and Yuval Lufan were fishing on the Sea of Galilee after a period of drought, causing the water level to be much lower than normal. The brothers noticed something sticking up out of the water. They were also amateur archaeologists as well as fishermen, and so, they decided to dig a little in the mud and they eventually uncovered an ancient fishing boat. Knowing the importance of not damaging the boat, the brothers left the boat where it was and reported their discovery to the Israeli authorities.

A team of professional archaeologists were then dispatched to excavate and examine the boat. Realizing that the remains of the boat were of tremendous historical importance to Jews and Christians alike, this special team of professionals and volunteers managed to excavate the boat from the mud without harming it. This was no easy task as the sea level was quickly rising. The entire process took 12 days and nights.

The remains of the boat turned out to be 27 feet long, 7 1/2 feet wide, and a height of a little over 4 feet.

The boat was then submerged in a chemical bath for 7 years before it could be displayed at a museum at a local Israeli museum. The vessel has been radiocarbon dated to either the first century BC or the first half of the first century AD. The boat is on display in the museum today. I didn't have the opportunity to see it when I was in Israel. I didn't even know about it.

The discovery of the "Jesus boat," as it has been called, is a reminder that some of the greatest moments in life are those that often come at unexpected times.

Was this boat actually one owned by Simon and Andrew or by James and John and their father Zebedee? We don't know. But whatever boat those disciples had would have been similar to this one on display in that Israeli museum. And so, it gives us a picture of what it was like to be a fisherman in Jesus's time. The boat obviously had close quarters with as many as four or even more persons in it at once. We read in the parallel passage of today's Sermon Lesson from the Gospel of Mark that James and John leave their father, Zebedee, behind in the boat with hired

hands. And so there would have been more than four persons in their boat at one time. We know from some of the stories in the Gospels that the disciples would often spend all night in the boat seeking to catch fish, and so, the boat was not only the place where they worked, but also, sometimes, their home and bedroom as well during those times when they would spend all day and night there. And of course we must remember that fishing in those days was done by nets. They didn't have a top of the line graphite rod that was easy on the hands. They didn't have an aluminum reel with precise ball bearings to reel in their catch. They didn't have the best fishing bait and a tackle box full of fancy lures. All they had were giant nets that they threw into the sea, hoping that a catch of fish would get caught in them. These nets of rope had to last a long time. When they ripped, they had to be re sewn over and over again because purchasing new nets was a very expensive prospect.

Our story takes place this morning after Jesus has been baptized by John the Baptist, who shortly afterward was arrested by King Herod Antipas. Jesus afterward survived the temptations of the devil for 40 days in the wilderness. And so now Jesus is ready to begin his public ministry at the age of about 32. He begins by calling followers, who would become

disciples. Among these are two pairs of brothers: Simon, who would later be called Peter, and Andrew, and James and John, the sons of Zebedee.

Jesus knows right from the beginning of his ministry that he cannot accomplish his redemptive mission alone. He needs helpers. He needs fellow human beings who would join him in that bold task. Jesus, Emmanuel, “God with us,” needs the help of the God in all of us.

And how does Jesus call these disciples? How does he reel them in? He makes the astonishing announcement that “the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matthew 4:17). In other words, the time is now to get on board and start sailing. This announcement is astonishing for two reasons.

First, the Jews had always believed that the kingdom would arrive only at the end of time as the culmination of God’s dramatic intervention into human events. The kingdom would be manifest in the perfection of the world, the wholeness and integration of all created things so that God’s purposes suddenly would take place everywhere at once.

But Jesus’s announcement about the kingdom is different. The kingdom is not only a reality at the end of time and history, but it is also immediately tangible and available in the person and work of Jesus himself and in the values and commitments of those who follow him. In

other words, the kingdom is here and now. It's present whenever and wherever those who follow Jesus gather, even right here in this chapel.

The second astounding thing Jesus is saying is his announcement that the present time of his public ministry is a special time. New Testament Greek has two different words for time. The first word is *chronos*, which means ordinary time. *Chronos* is the time we keep with our clocks and watches. It is linear time, how we mark the passage of minutes and hours, days and weeks, years and decades. We get the English word *chronology* from the Greek word *chronos*.

The word for time in Greek is *kairos*. *Kairos* is God's time, that particular moment of the inbreaking of God's will and purpose into the life of human beings and the whole creation. A *kairos* moment is a moment when God accomplishes through us what we cannot accomplish ourselves. *Kairos* moments are times of transformation when everything we thought we knew and understood about our lives is instantly changed, and we find ourselves compelled to go in a new direction.

Jesus calls Peter and Andrew and James and John to leave all that is familiar and comfortable and embark on a new adventure. He tells them, "You've been fishermen on the Sea of Galilee for many years. Now

you will follow me and you will start fishing for people. This is the *kairos* moment that comes to every person who receives the call to go in a new direction and become part of the kingdom of God crashing into the world.

Just as Jesus called the two pairs of brothers, he calls you and me. But sometimes it's hard for us to make sense of that call. Those like me who are ordained clergy must articulate that call to the Association Committee on Ministry, on which I sit. I hear students in discernment every month talk about the call that they have received from God. We on the committee require that each candidate for the ordained ministry speak about that call in order to be ordained into the "Ministry of the Word and Sacraments in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ."

But that doesn't let the rest of you off the hook. I should be able to ask every one of you to talk about your call by God and you should be able to articulate it for me. All those who bear the name of Christ are called to share in his ministry in the church and in the world.

The noted theologian H. Richard Niebuhr, whom we in the UCC can claim as one of our own, broke down the concept of call into four different categories.

First, there is the common call, the invitation to ministry which is

central to our baptism. In baptism we are joined to Christ through the gracious power of the Holy Spirit and are called to participate in the ministry of the church.

Second, there is the secret call, the private, personal connection with God's Spirit offered to all of us, but recognized only by some. The secret call is that *kairos* moment when God's need and our willingness meet in a transformational moment when you're sure that God is calling you to do a specific ministry or mission.

Third, there is the ecclesiastical call, a call to minister within the offices of the church as a Minister of the Word and Sacraments, or as a Deacon, or as a Sunday School Teacher, or as a Trustee, or as a Musician, or in some other office of the church. We should remember that the ecclesiastical call is not any better than any other kind of call. There are many Christians who are fulfilling a calling not officially recognized by the Church, such as schoolteachers, social workers, community organizers, and those who work for non-profits.

The fourth and final kind of call is what H. Richard Niebuhr described as the providential call, the ministry given to us through our unique talents and abilities. One interesting observation about our

Sermon Lesson this morning is how Jesus begins right where Peter, Andrew, James, and John are in their lives. He doesn't begin with what *he* knows, but rather, with what *they* know and do best. Jesus tells them, "Follow me, you fishermen, and I will make you fish for people!" (Matthew 4:19). Jesus's call to each of us begins with us and who we are and with our own unique abilities, interests, and passions. It's by doing what we do best that we honor and serve God, whether in the church or in the world.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of our Sermon Lesson is the speed with which the call is answered. Peter and Andrew and James and John don't hesitate for a minute. Immediately they leave their livelihood and loved ones and follow Jesus. They take the plunge of responding to the *kairos* moment of God's call. When Jesus calls them, they were going about business as usual: casting their nets into the water, pulling them back in, sorting and salting the fish, preparing them to be sold at the market, and maintaining their equipment.

Perhaps they thought that the call would be easier than their fishing profession. Did they realize what it would entail to be a follower of Jesus? It would involve a lot of hard work, suffering, and sacrifice. Not

that the fishing was an easy profession. Perhaps you've seen the bumper sticker that says, "A Bad Day Fishing is Better than a Good Day at Work." Well, that may be the case today, but it certainly wasn't in Jesus's day. Those who entered the occupation of fishing were not doing it for fun and recreation.

The four of them were not nestled into a drifting boat on a smooth pond. Even when I took a ride around the Sea of Galilee, the wind would stir up every now and then, causing the waves to become pretty choppy. I sit right at the edge of the boat and I did get splashed on a couple of times. Those fishermen in our story weren't snoozing with a cap pulled down over their eyes and a pole gently resting in the crook of their arms. They didn't have a cooler filled with beer and sandwiches to munch on as they relaxed all afternoon. They must have had hard, calloused hands from handling the rope of the nets all day and sore muscles and aching backs from throwing the nets and hauling in the catch. And of course there was always the lingering smell of fish on them. Even the hottest bath probably could not keep all the flies away. Not that fishing was the worst occupation around. They weren't rich, but they weren't exactly living in poverty either. Remember that James and John had hired hands,

so they at least were able by their fishing to have a small business with employees.

And yet they left their boats, let go of their nets, and responded to the call of Jesus. Why did they do it?

I think a clue is found in the literal meaning of the Greek word for disciple, which means “learner.” To be a disciple is to learn from Jesus, specifically, to learn how to be captured by his love in such a way that people around us also find themselves caught in the net of God’s unconditional love. In today’s story, being a disciple means to leave in the sense of abruptly changing that which we have been in order to become that which we can still be. It was a *kairos* moment for Peter, Andrew, James, and John, and they could not resist the call.

Kairos moments come to us too, moments when, instead of counting the cost, we accept the challenge and the risks involved, moments when by saying yes to something new, we also say no to something old. Are we willing to obey such a call? Or are we afraid of what God may be calling us to do? Are we afraid that God might be calling us to pull up stakes and travel to a faraway exotic land to minister for the church and kingdom?

Let us remember that the place God calls you is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. If in fact God is calling you to a faraway place, that's the place that will bring you the most happiness. But maybe God is calling you to remain where you are. But God might still be offering you a *kairos* moment. Staying where you are doesn't mean staying the way you are. God might be calling you to do something completely different with your life. If so, the time is now. "The kingdom of heaven has come near!" Amen.