

## WHAT ABOUT ZEBEDEE?

Phil. 3:10-14, p. 211  
Matthew 4:12-23, p. 3

October 8, 2023  
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The sun had risen over the eastern hills, its rays glinting across the quiet lake. Gulls circled overhead or picked up bits of food along the shore. The village men had come back from a night's fishing. A few were casting their nets one last time, while others cleaned and mended nets to prepare for the next night's work.

Zebedee looked up at the sun. Its rays were welcome now, but in a few hours they would feel too warm on the old man's face. Well, maybe he wasn't so old, he thought. Forty-five summers, perhaps – more than thirty of those years spent here on this lake, where he had learned to fish in his father's boat. And now his sons would carry on the family business when he was gone. Thank goodness James and John hadn't joined up with the Zealots, who were eager to fight the Roman soldiers any time, any place. He had heard of the terrible things that had happened under Herod 30 or 40 years ago, but lately things had been fairly quiet in little Capernaum. And the Roman soldiers stationed nearby needed to eat, so his business was doing well.

Lost in thought, he nearly missed the approach of the man who had recently come to town – originally from Nazareth, he had heard. He recognized the two men with him – his neighbors Simon and Andrew. Suddenly James and John scrambled out of his boat. "Wait, sons! Where are you going?" he called after them. But they were gone, leaving him to finish mending the nets alone.

"Follow me!" Jesus had said, and that's what James and John did. But what about Zebedee?

Zebedee stayed in the boat when his sons left. He had no idea what kind of change this new teacher from Nazareth would bring. Probably James and John, Simon Peter and Andrew had no idea either. Galilee was the place for new ideas, or maybe for rebelling against new ideas. The unrest was fed by the injustice of Roman rule, and by the collaboration of some religious leaders with the occupation leaders. Then, as now, it was the younger generation who pushed for change. But Jesus hadn't come to overthrow the Romans, though many were hoping for a Messiah to do just that. Instead, Jesus and his disciples would bring a different kind of rule, not the peace of Augustus maintained by Roman legions, but a new way of life that he would call the kingdom of God. Zebedee didn't know about that. He couldn't have imagined it that day, as he watched his sons follow Jesus down the road and away from him. They had heard the call, and they left.

Zebedee did not. He stayed with his boat. Why? Lots of reasons come to my mind – all speculation, of course. For one thing, Zebedee had responsibilities. There was his boat (not everyone had a boat – probably Simon and Andrew stood in the lake to cast their nets). There was the night's catch of fish – it wouldn't be good stewardship of his resources if they were left to rot on the shore. And what about his wife and the rest of the family, and his position in the village, and so forth. He just couldn't take off and do something drastic! He couldn't let go of all that to follow this new teacher. So even if he had heard the words of Jesus, he did not leave his boat that day.

Or maybe Jesus hadn't called Zebedee at all. Maybe Jesus knew his first disciples needed to be younger folks who weren't so tied down, who were eager for change. If Zebedee thought the call was only for the younger generation, he could have felt left out, the way some of us probably felt when our children left home for work or college or military service, or like when someone else says they hear the call of God and we don't.

But there could be another reason. It just might not have been the right time for Zebedee. I wonder if he became a follower of Jesus, not on the road, but later. Since his name is mentioned so often in the Gospels as the father of James and John, where the fathers of the other disciples are rarely named, it's possible that Zebedee was well known to early Christians. Maybe he helped organize the early gatherings in Capernaum. After all, Jesus made Capernaum his home as he began his ministry, so Zebedee would have had the opportunity to get acquainted with him. I'm wondering if Zebedee might even have made good-sized donations for the support of Jesus and his disciples during those months they were on the road.

I hope that was the case. Because then we can see that we Zebedees, we older folks, can also answer the call of Jesus. It may not be a call to leave everything behind, but it is always a call to become more like Jesus, to trust his word and to live his way. It is also a call to support and encourage those around us, as well as those who are leaving home to do the work God has called them to do.

What exactly did Jesus call those first disciples to do? The verses that began and ended our Gospel lesson describe the mission of Jesus. First, he proclaimed, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Repent means more than saying "I'm sorry." It means to turn around, to change our perspective. Then, with disciples following him, Jesus "went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness among the people."

Jesus **taught** the law of Moses and the writings of the prophets with a new perspective. For instance, “You have heard that it is said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, Love your enemies. Do good to those who persecute you, and pray for those who despitefully use you.”

He **preached** the good news that God is for us and not against us. That we are part of God’s family, which is even more important than our human families, and that God forgives us, welcomes us home and sets us free. Think of the story of the prodigal son and his father.

Jesus brought **healing** and comfort to those who were ill, to the untouchables and the outcasts and those whose lives had been destroyed by the forces of Roman occupation and religious discrimination.

Preaching, teaching, healing. His disciples learned how to do that by watching him. Preaching, teaching, and healing became distinguishing marks of the early church. We can do that, individually or as a congregation. By feeding and welcoming people, we bring healing of body, mind and spirit. Community Meals has restarted; I hope some of you are helping with that. By showing kindness and mercy, we teach the ways of Jesus. By praying with and for people, by standing up for those who have been neglected and rejected, we share the good news of God’s love. “Preach the Gospel in all ways,” St. Francis of Assisi said. “Use words if necessary.” Actions speak the Good News of the Gospel as clearly as words, maybe more clearly. We are all called to do as those disciples did, as the early church did: preach, teach, and heal as we have opportunity.

I know – many of us in this room are retired. But the call of Jesus doesn’t end when we retire. I’ve been working on that for ten years: What is my call now? That call will change over the years, but it doesn’t end, even when we’re in the hospital or nursing home. An older woman in St. Helens taught me that. Physical problems had confined her to bed in long-term care. She began to wonder what good she was to anyone. One day as I was visiting her, she told me that she realized there was something she could do. She could be grateful. So she made it her mission to thank everyone who came into her room, whether they brought food, or cleaned the floor, or took her vital signs, or read to her, or whatever. I think she was getting as much out of this last call of God as the people she thanked.

Again, this applies to congregations as well as to individuals. Many churches are getting smaller, with lower attendance at services, fewer people helping with community outreach, smaller offerings in the plate. Does this mean there is nothing left for small congregations to do? Absolutely not! I’ve been distressed by the number of small Presbyterian churches in Portland who have closed

over the last ten years or so. Did they fail in their mission? Did God give up on them? I don't think so. Each church had its own unique way of following Jesus, preaching and teaching in its own authentic voice, healing with its own loving touch. The members of those churches celebrated their years of faithful ministry and then mostly became active members of larger Presbyterian churches nearby.

Columbia County is different. We have a lot of small churches of different denominations. We each have our own way of following Jesus. Some people express the opinion that it would be better for small churches to merge. No problem with that, if it seems that the Spirit of Christ is leading in that direction. But I really like the way the Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Baptists, and so forth, in our community, have kept their own voices, their own history, their own style of worship and leadership, as they have continued to preach, teach, and heal in their own unique way – while still working together to serve the community in the name of Jesus Christ, regardless of where we find ourselves on Sunday morning. Smaller congregations can still be faithful to that call. For 127 years, God has been faithful to the church called Plymouth here in St. Helens.

So, what about Zebedee? You know, I think he eventually did hear the call of Jesus and recognized that it was for him, too, even though he wasn't young and energetic.

Whatever our age or physical ability, we can still hear the call of Jesus. We can still believe that the Spirit of Christ will guide us in a good way. Sometimes it's a hard way. Sometimes the steps are so small, it seems like nothing much is happening. But if you can speak a word of encouragement or welcome a stranger or send a card or donate food or any of those other ordinary things you might do, that is the call of God leading you into an act of service. We might not name it a call of God, we might not hear it with our ears, but that inner nudge to reach out in love and concern is our most common way of hearing the call to follow Christ.

Was Zebedee able to do that? I hope he was. I hope that's why his name shows up in Scripture. Our names won't show up in Scripture or in history books, but maybe someone, years from now, will remember you, and something you have said or done to help them, and will thank God for you. We might not know that we have made a difference, but every time we reach out to help or encourage someone, we are answering the call of Jesus: "Follow me."

Let us pray. Eternal God, in the voice of your Son Jesus, we hear you calling us and sending us out to do your work and show your love. Give us open ears to hear you, a willing heart to love you, and strength to follow where Christ leads. Amen.