

Third Sunday after the Epiphany  
January 25, 2026  
Matthew 4:12-23



This is the only scene in Matthew's Gospel where we witness Jesus calling his disciples. Later, they simply appear — already following, already listening, already participating in the work of the kingdom (see Matthew

10:1-4). But here, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, we see the moment



that changes everything.

In Matthew 4:12-23, the author draws our attention to two things about these first followers: their family ties and their work. Simon Peter and Andrew are brothers, as are James and John. And Matthew names Zebedee, their father, too. Fishing is not just their job; it's identity, security, belonging. Their lives are formed by the inherited knowledge of generations, not a chosen path, but one grown into.

And then Jesus arrives: "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people"

This is not a promise to improve their business model or expand the family enterprise. His call is about transformation — a shift in allegiance, imagination and purpose.

We often preach Matthew 4:12-23 heroically. Look how quickly the disciples respond! Look at their courage! They drop their nets "immediately," as if they already know Jesus' voice and the direction their lives must now take. And that is beautiful.

But what about the father left in the boat?

Zebedee had trained his sons and sacrificed for them. They were to inherit the family business, care for their elders, carry on the name. In James and

John, a family made plans and anchored their hope. Now, they choose differently.

When these two young men step out at the water's edge and follow Jesus, Zebedee watches his sons choose an unknown, potentially dangerous path. To some, Jesus is a prophet. To others, a troublemaker. To Rome, eventually, a threat.

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The kingdom of God reorders every relationship and disrupts patterns we assumed were permanent. We aren't told what Zebedee feels, but it isn't hard to imagine a father's ache. The silence of the text leaves space for grief — for the life he imagined, for the plans that will not unfold the way he hoped.

Those of us who love children (as parents, grandparents, mentors, church family) have all felt this grief. We hold dreams for our children. We picture their future. We imagine how they will live near us, believe like us, perhaps even follow in our footsteps. And then, at some point, they step out of the boat.

But in baptism, we say aloud what is already true: our children ultimately belong to God. They are marked as Christ's own **forever**. They are claimed by a love that began before their parents ever held them. As parents, we promise to **love fiercely, raise wisely**, and – eventually – **release**. Sometimes, what they choose frightens us. Sometimes it feels like loss. Yet we agree to participate in God's story for them, not insist on our own.

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Oftentimes, Jesus' call is a call to let go of imagined futures, of control.

God's kingdom is not built on our ability to hold tight, but on our willingness to loosen our grip and trust that what God is building is larger, deeper, more life-giving than what we leave behind.

I like to imagine Zebedee staying in the boat not as a failure of faith, but as another form of faithfulness. Just as Jesus called James and John, God is not done with Zebedee either. Someone still has to fish. Someone still has to feed people. Someone must sit with the ache of change and trust that God is present there, too.

#### Questions for reflection on Matthew 4:12-23

1. Where in your life do you feel like Zebedee — sitting in the boat, watching something or someone you love move in a direction you didn't expect? What emotions rise in you around this scene? How might God meet you in that place?
2. What expectations have you carried for your children, loved ones, community, or even yourself that may need to be released? How can you honor the grief of letting those expectations go while still blessing the new path unfolding?
3. When Jesus' call disrupts comfort, routines, or plans what helps you trust that God is still at work? Can you name a time when loss or change eventually revealed unexpected grace?