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“The Pull Towards Home”

A sermon by Mindy Douglas

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

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Matthew 4:12-23

Growing up, my sisters and I were allowed to watch a few cartoons on Saturday mornings when we had a television in our house. We had our favorites and took turns watching the ones we liked. When the cartoons were over, the next thing that came on was a show many of you will remember, **Mutual of Omaha’s “Wild Kingdom.”** We loved the wildness of this show and the way it took us places we could never go in real life.

Professor Rodger Nishioka at Columbia Seminary also remembers watching this show, which came on every Sunday night in his town, and which his whole family would watch together. He writes:

For my Presbyterian pastor father, each episode was a theological journey demonstrating to us all yet once again the wonders of God’s creativity and imagination in the natural world. From the savannas of Kenya to the barrier reef in Australia to the jungles of Borneo, we . . . watched with fascination as the host introduced new creatures and opened the world to us.

One episode I remember fondly [writes Nishioka] was about the **elephant seals of Argentina.** The show focused on a mother and her seal pup, who had just been born. Soon after birthing her baby, the mother, now famished, abandoned the pup on the shore so she could go feed in the rich waters off the coast. After feeding, she returned to a different part of the beach and

began to call for her baby. Other mothers had done the same, and all had returned at a similar time; I remember thinking they would never find one another. The camera then followed the mother as she called to her pup and listened for the response. Following each other's voices and scents, soon the mother and pup were reunited. The host explained that, from the moment of birth, the sound and scent of the pup are imprinted in the mother's memory and the sound and scent of the mother are imprinted in the pup's memory. This fascinated me especially when Dad turned to me and said, **“You know, that's how it is with God. We are imprinted with a memory of God, and God is imprinted with a memory of us, and even if it takes a lifetime, we will still find each other.”**¹

In our Matthew text for today, we hear the story of the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in Galilee. The gospel writer invites the readers to understand who Jesus is as the fulfillment of the prophecy from Isaiah regarding the coming of the light to the people who sat in darkness. Jesus is the light.

As Jesus walks along the Sea of Galilee, he sees two sets of brothers, Peter and Andrew, James and John. They are busy doing the work that they do every day—casting their nets, mending their nets, fishing for a living, fishing because it is what they know how to do. And then Jesus appears and says “Follow me.” Immediately, without question or concern, they leave their nets, their boat, and their father, and they follow Jesus. It is as if they are somehow imprinted with the mental memory of the knowledge of God; it is as if they have been waiting all their lives to hear *this* voice, to bask in *this* light, to be given *this* call.

I don't know about you, but I find this to be simply amazing.

Funny how Peter and Andrew, James and John are just a little bit like those pups on the shore who hear their mother's voice, their mother's call, and they know exactly where they need to be in order to be at home. When these brothers hear Jesus call to them, they drop what they are doing and go to Jesus. It is as if the desire to follow Jesus has been imprinted in their hearts and minds because they

¹ *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol 1, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 285-6.

experience God in such a way that they cannot even put into words. They leave their livelihood, all that they have ever known, and they follow a stranger.

I doubt that these four would have been at all able to explain to any of the other fishermen their decision to leave their nets and labor and father. It didn't make a lick of sense. Wasn't logical at all. Couldn't be argued by charts or graphs or mathematical formulas. They just knew in their hearts it was right. They just knew there was something different about Jesus, something special, something they couldn't explain but felt with their whole being. Somehow they just knew Jesus was where they would be finally and fully at home.

Have you ever been asked to defend your belief in God? Have you ever been up against someone who questions your faith by saying, "Yes, but how do you *know* God exists? Can you prove it? Why do you believe then? Why do you follow Jesus?" We find ourselves sputtering and looking foolish as we try to explain what cannot be explained and try to defend what we cannot logically defend.

Our belief in God, you see, cannot be defended using proof or evidence, as if it were a calculus problem or a science experiment. For many of us, we just believe. Our faith is a part of the fabric of our being. Our memory is imprinted with a knowledge of God. Somewhere along the way in life, we woke up to God's amazing grace and to the brightness of the light of Jesus' love, and we knew. Somehow we have an imprint of God in our hearts that we don't even fully understand ourselves. God's love for us, our faith in Jesus, can't be logically explained, and yet we know it in the fiber of our being. And so we believe. We just believe.

Novelist, playwright, professor, and poet, Reynolds Price, who died six years ago on this weekend, wrote about this imprinting of God, this sense of God, in his book *Letter to a Man in the Fire*:

My belief in a Creator [Price writes] derives largely from detailed and overpowering personal intuition, an unshakable hunch, and a set of demonstrations that go far back in my consciousness—well before I began to comprehend the details of the world of . . . faith . . .

Starting on a warm afternoon in the summer of 1939, when I was wandering alone in the pine woods by our suburban house in Piedmont, North Carolina, I've experienced moments of sustained calm awareness that subsequent questioning has never discounted. Those moments, which recurred at unpredictable and widely spaced intervals . . . still seem to me undeniable manifestations of the Creator's benign, or patiently watchful, interest in particular stretches of my life . . .

To be more descriptive, in the moments or openings . . . I've heard what amounts to a densely complex yet piercingly direct harmony that appears to come from the heart of whatever reality made us and watches our lives.

There've been . . . no gleaming illusory messengers, almost no words; and the music that underlies each moment is silent but felt in every cell like a grander pulse beneath my own.²

I wonder if this is what the disciples felt on the Sea of Galilee that day when Jesus walked by and called them to follow. I wonder if they felt that grander pulse in their cells, felt that pull from within, were drawn by some "densely complex yet piercingly direct harmony" that came from the heart of God. I wonder . . .

I wonder, too, if you hear it, if you feel it? If you have ever heard or felt it? The pulse that calls us back home. The pulse that calls us away from our nets and our labors—calls us away from the tedium of the day, the repeated motions, the never-ending cycles—and calls us into that which is deeper, and that which is in the light, and that which is eternal. I wonder if you hear it—if you feel it.

Maybe you do. Maybe you don't. And either way is okay. You are here, in this place, because some part of you, whether you can name it or not, has heard the pulse of the music of God, has felt the pulse of God in your cellular structure, has intuited, as Price has, that there *is* something beyond us (or that there might be), that God is found in the daily casting of nets, the daily tasks before each one of us, and God is also more. God *is* home. Through Jesus, we are invited to come home,

²*Letter to a Man in the Fire: Does God Exist and Does He Care?* (New York City: Scribner, 1999), 27-8.

to come home by following Jesus, just as James and John, Peter and Andrew came home when they answered Jesus' call without hesitation.

Like these disciples, we are invited by Jesus to come home and rest in the heart of God.

Now some of you are going to want to know what this means exactly. Some are going to want a more practical description of what it means to follow Jesus. What are we supposed to do? How are we supposed to act? What does this Jesus-following look like in the real world?

If we read the gospel message, we can know a good bit of what it means to follow Jesus by witnessing the way Jesus lived his life and the things Jesus taught his disciples and the crowds that gathered around him. In the very next chapter of Matthew, Jesus will teach in the Sermon on the Mount many essential ways we live out our lives as followers of Jesus who live in the light and bear the light. You know some of them probably:

- Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you.
- Be reconciled to one another.
- Let your light shine before others.
- Forgive one another.
- Do not store up treasures on earth.
- Seek first God's kingdom.
- Do not be anxious about tomorrow.
- Judge not.
- Build your life upon a solid foundation: listen to Jesus' words and do them.
- Love God. Love one another.

Will all of this be easy? No.

Will we all succeed all the time? No.

So do we have to follow Jesus then? No. We don't.

But if you are feeling that cellular pulse of God pulling you in to an understanding of God in whatever way that is, then you will not be able to rest until you come to him, until you set those nets down and turn your back on that metaphorical boat and walk toward Jesus. You will not be able to rest until you allow that pulse, that imprint, to draw you back to that place where you are meant to be. With God.

So . . . to our confirmands who are exploring God's call to them to follow Jesus and to those of you who are also seeking to discern what it means to be a person of faith in the scary, crazy, war-torn, and confusing world in which we live today, I will say this: following Jesus is not just another job. It is not tedium, and it will not be boring, or confining, or suffocating. It *will* be true freedom, active love, unceasing hope, and endless joy.

Most of all, though? It will be home.

It will be home.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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