

## Aha!

Jan Wiersma, Sherrie Wilson, Dave Copeland  
Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota  
3rd Sunday after Epiphany - January 22, 2023  
Texts: Isaiah 49:1-6, Psalm 40:1-11, Matthew 4:

Isaiah 49:1-6

Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away!

The Lord called me before I was born,  
while I was in my mother's womb he named me....

To me he now says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant  
to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel;

I will give you as a light to the nations,  
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

Matthew 4:12-23

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

'Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,  
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—  
the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light,  
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.'

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

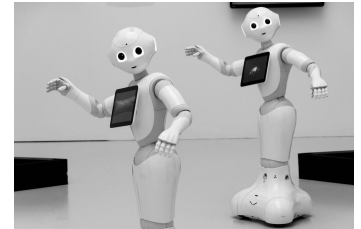
As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.' Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. Word of God, Word of Life. **Thanks be to God,**



As you know, another name for my own "personal faith journey" is "my checkered past." When I turned to God—and remember, last week we defined repentance as turning again and again to God, a daily process—I enthusiastically sang the song, "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus." Imagine my dismay when I cast my lot with Lutherans and was

emphatically informed that *that* hymn had no place in our hymnals or practice. “You don’t decide for God,” I was told. “God decides for you.” I get the point: left to ourselves, we won’t choose God, all day, every day. We can’t. We get too distracted, too blown around by the dilemmas of daily life. We do have free will, but we abuse it a lot. We choose chips and candy bars instead of kale and quinoa. On the other hand, God never lets up on loving, choosing, and calling you.

So what about Peter and Andrew, James and John, peacefully minding their own fishing business? Along comes Jesus and says, “Follow me.” They drop their nets mid-cast and follow. Did they even have a choice? Are they basically robots, hard-wired to obey? Was this the first time they ever laid eyes on Jesus, or had they been working up to this? Come on, Matthew, give us the backstory here! I’m sure there must be one. Matthew doesn’t say, but it begs the question: How do we make decisions about our lives, anyway?



Was choosing your spouse love at first sight, no hesitations, met on Sunday, married on Monday? Or was it more gradual, friendship followed by conversation, dating, breaking up and making up, then the clincher? How did you find your career? When you were five, did you say, “I’m going to be a fireman when I grow up,” and sure enough, you’re a fireman? If that were always true, we’d have a lot more firemen today! It does happen both ways, right? The instant “aha” and the gradual change of direction.

This Epiphany season we’ve been talking about our own epiphanies, our own “aha” moments. Well, mostly I’ve been talking about mine and encouraging you to think about yours. Today you get a break from me: you get to hear from Sherrie and Dave about epiphanies in their lives. As you listen, look for parallels with your own experience, listen for the backstory. Sometimes the epiphany apparently comes out of nowhere. Sometimes, especially in hindsight, what led up to the “aha” moment is clear. What all epiphanies have in common, though, is that they change the course of our lives, in little ways or big ones.

*Sherrie spoke of her love for cats and the injunction from her daily cat calendar to look with hope toward the future. When her career as a university professor was derailed by a Parkinson’s diagnosis, she retired early and moved back to Minnesota to be close to family. Despite the bleakness of the early days, she came to realize that she could live every day with contentment and happiness. Friends here at church (as well as her cat and family) have made that possible. Understanding that a good life was still available to her was her “aha” moment.*

*While working a demanding and sedentary job, Dave resolved to take up running to lose weight. Even as he strengthened his body, he was diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphoma. Determined to run the last marathon he’d committed to, he put off chemo with his doctor’s blessing until he*

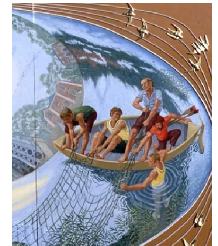
*had done so. When he did undergo treatment his body responded amazingly well, thanks, he was told, to being so fit to begin with. Aha! While going in for treatments on the 10th floor of the Mayo Gonda building, he would recognize others in treatment. Words of encouragement and hope to them literally became his “elevator speech,” as he shared the light of his own epiphany.*

I am deeply moved by both stories: both epiphanies have a complex backstory, both describe potentially devastating diagnoses, and both shine light for others who may be struggling. [Sherrie’s Parkinson’s is slow moving and she is doing well; Dave’s cancer is gone. He’s running marathons again. But even if the picture were not so bright right now, their epiphanies along the way would sustain them, I’m sure.]



Today after worship, we meet for business as a congregation. Yes, in some cases we’ll make decisions. We may have some “aha” moments. But mostly, I would say our course has already been set, the changes we agree on have been determined by the incremental choices we’ve made all along the way. The ultimate question, though, is, “Why are we as a congregation here? What has God been calling us to do and be all along?” The backstory tells a lot about the present, and even about the future. Jesus called us once, calls us daily, calls us forever to follow him, to show up to be the “aha” for others, the ones that invite others people into the family. God already loves everyone more than they know.

Jesus calls you to not to ignore the world and its puzzles and perplexities but to sail out in faith that whatever you need will be provided, that your gifts and talents, all that makes you uniquely you, will be utilized. God has a place for you and for CPC in this crazy, mixed-up world that no one else, absolutely *no one* else can fill. God has already decided for you. It’s up to you to follow.



To close this part of the service with a little meditation on water, I share a poem written by Steve Garnaas-Holmes based on this text and on the idea of God’s call pulling you inescapably toward the ocean of Love in the divine heart.

The wind blows whitecaps on the river,  
as if to shove the whole thing upstream.



It's unrelenting, the pressure  
to go that way.

You can hardly think for yourself  
with all the news of what you need to do,

directions up so many streets,

a different wind on every street.

But beneath the wind the river, unmistakable,  
flows to the sea.

Listen deep, beneath the playlist,  
the parade drums, the spangled desperations

the serene “follow me” of love, silent,  
already in you, drawn, flowing.

—Steve Garnaas-Holmes, *Unfolding Light*, Thursday, January 18

#### IMAGE CREDITS

Koenig, Peter. St. Peter and St. Andrew, and Ceiling Painting for St Bede's, from **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN.

<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=58545> [retrieved January 21, 2023]. Original source: Peter Winfried (Canisius) Koenig, <https://www.pwkoenig.co.uk/>.

#### Prayers

In addition to those already named, we pray this morning for resolution of medical issues for those who have been ill, for healing to those currently undergoing treatments of various kinds, for peace to those who struggle, and comfort to all who mourn.

We pray for the people of Peru and Ukraine and every troubled spot; and we pray for the families of the victims of this morning’s mass shooting in Monterey Park; we pray for those who have to decide between paying rent and eating; those who must choose between fleeing their homes and foreign domination; those who have no choice about where and how to live, who have no good life options open to them because of poverty, tyranny, war, weather, or other circumstances beyond their control. May we not only provide bandaids but work toward solutions.

Blessed creator, you have called us to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden. But we trust that, as you have led us in the past, so you will guide us through the future. We ask your blessing on the discussion and decisions we share this morning. Open our eyes to needs within this community and beyond. May we remember that we are, above all, your people, called to be light in the world.

We pray in Jesus’ name: Our Father and Mother in heaven...