

Text: Matthew 4: 12-23
Title: Two Roads Diverged
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A great American poem by a great American poet takes up the imagery of coming to a place where the path splits in two. You may remember the last lines.

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

Of course, when confronted with the same dilemma New York Yankee manager, Yogi Berra, opined, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.”

Both Frost and Berra recognized that life has moments of decision wherein we are called to turn one way or the other.

Do we follow the well-worn trail or the rocky road?
Do we take the path of least resistance or swim up-stream?
Do we follow the mind or the heart?
Do we pursue passion or safety?

And the corollary question:

How do we decide which road to take?
How do we know which way to turn?
What voices and expectations do we listen to?
How do we know which way to go?

Jesus took the road less traveled.

Jesus did the unexpected.

Consider our text...

First century Jews living under Roman rule longed for God to show up in Jerusalem to reclaim the temple and overthrow the oppressor. They expected a Messiah to come down from a high holy mountain or to rise up from a valley of dry bones to throw a wrench in the political machine, throw out the powers that be, and establish a God-blessed kingdom.

But, Jesus does the unexpected.

Our text reads that “When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee.” He doesn’t storm the city gates or step into the spotlight. He doesn’t even stay home in Nazareth. Instead, he “withdrew,” he hightailed it, he took the road less traveled to the region of Galilee, to the town of Capernaum.

Now. That’s about 80 miles north of Jerusalem and forty miles from Nazareth ~ no easy journey at a donkey’s pace. And there’s no way to tell when he left or how long he took,

but Jesus certainly heads for the boonies. He skirts the center and heads to the edges, to the top of the Sea of Galilee, and the base of the northern most mountainous region of Israel. Jesus goes to a place that historically had been exposed to foreign invasions, suffered from wars with Syria and Assyria, and was surrounded by pagan influences. It was about as far from the center of Jewish life as you could go and still be in Israel. Thus, it was “Galilee of the Gentiles.”

As one wordy scholar puts it:

In his sovereign grace God did the wholly unexpected. Not mainly to the Jerusalem aristocracy, but especially to the despised, sorely afflicted, and largely ignorant masses of Galilee, a mixed Gentile-Jewish population, did he send his Son.

Now. I don't think it was incidental, or simply part of a plan insuring that he didn't get into trouble too fast, but Jesus sets up shop where he was least expected. He casts his lot with those on the outside of power.

I guess it could be that Jesus was demonstrating that God's activity pushes beyond the boundaries of the Jews. And, so Matthew – this most Jewish of the Gospels, who includes women in the genealogy, and astrologers at the birth – is again highlighting that God keeps reaching out and that God keeps going where God isn't expected.

So, it-is-in-this-out-of-the-way-place where Jesus calls his disciples. He doesn't find them in the halls of learning or the corridors of power, he doesn't meet them in the synagogue or the seminary or on the senate floor; he finds them on the margins.

In the middle of the day,
on the shores of a distant lake,
nowhere near the temple,
in the flow of life,
Jesus walks by and calls out a couple working stiffs just trying to make a wage.

He calls two guys who prove to be neither the brightest or the bravest,
two guys who weren't looking for him,
two guys who came to a fork in the road.

Dear friends, it is actually a bit of an overreach to think that these men simply dropped their nets, left their boats and families, and took the road less traveled.

We know that Zebedee stayed back to tend to the fish. And, we know that further down the road Jesus healed Peter's mother in-law (Matthew 8:14). So, they didn't completely cut bait and run. The sense of the Greek phrasing in this passage is that their leaving was decisive, but it was also part of the culture for there to be traveling teachers and for the students/disciples to follow along to listen and learn.

In first century Judaism the rabbi didn't call the students. It was considered bad form for a rabbi to go out and ask people to become his disciples. The responsibility fell on the student to seek out a teacher.

But, here Jesus chose them. There was no application process, review committee, or fishing tests. Jesus tracked them down – intrusive and impractical and incongruous as it may be – and called them to follow. In the words of G.K. Chesterton:

An adventure is, by its nature, a thing that comes to us...

We don't know what Andrew and Peter thought they were getting into when they followed Jesus. We don't know what James and John said to their father as they left to follow Jesus. Neither do we know the pragmatic details of what their following looked like, felt like, or if this was their first encounter with Jesus. What we know is:

Jesus sought them,
Jesus found them,
Jesus called them,
and they followed.

One way to characterize the Bible is as a record of humanity's long search for God. But, it is better understood that scripture is the story of God's search for humanity.

Over and over in scripture God seeks after us.

God goes looking for Adam and Eve.
God calls Abraham.
God tracks down Jacob.
God picks Moses.
God interrupts Jeremiah.
God chooses David.
God intrudes on Mary.
God gathers a band of disciples.
God calls you and me.

May the news be that simple and that good:

Whether we're rascals or recluses,
whether we're impulsive or timid,
whether we think we've got it buttoned down or it's all coming apart,
God seeks after us and calls us to follow.
Thanks be to God.

So, the question is how do we know when or where God is calling us to follow?
How do we know the calling of God when we're at a fork in the road?

When Sandi and I were living in New York and considering a move back to Chicagoland to come to Hope, we came for a weekend to look for housing and weigh the move. Our kids were in thriving in junior high and high school with good friends and a healthy vibe. We had a quaint little house in an idyllic neighborhood and could be in the mountains in under an hour. We were both gainfully employed and had good friends and....

And yet, we ended up sitting in the sun on a bench in front of the Wrigley Building, watching people, eating a bag of Garrett's cheese-caramel mix and trying to decide what to do. What made sense for our kids? What made sense for us? What made sense for career and call and contentment? What made sense for God? Two roads were diverging, did God have a particular road in mind?

Dear friends, there's a popular notion in contemporary Christianity that God has a specific plan or purpose for our lives and that it is incumbent upon us to figure out what God wants. For some God's will is granular: God is holding a particular dining room table or securing a favorable interest rate on a loan. For some God's leading has a broader stroke: There a right college or career or spouse but God may not have an opinion with where you park or who cleans your teeth.

Whatever your experience or sense of God's leading I don't want to dissuade you that God has a particular will for your life. As that is helpful, so be it. I find it easier to see the outline of God's will by looking in the rearview mirror rather than by looking for hints and clues in front of me. I don't know if there is only one path that fits into God's will. I don't know if God is invested in granular details or broad strokes. I don't know if the road less traveled or the well-worn path is God's will....

But, I believe that there are ways in which God's will is clear.

I do believe that God has provided a window into which path to follow.

What's clear to me is that Jesus calls Andrew and Peter and James and John to follow him and then what follows in Matthew 5 and 6 and 7 are the contours of the will of God. What follows are what it means to follow the path of Jesus. For example, Jesus says,

You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I tell you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

Or,

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.... For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

You get the idea. Jesus calls us to follow a way of light in darkness, a way of truth in a culture of lies, a way of mercy, the way of the cross.... (I would seem easier if God was invested in dining room tables.) But, someday when you're cleaning nets, or looking for your brother, or waiting for your lover, or doing your best to make ends meet, or burying the dead, or buying the bread, Jesus will show up and call you to follow.

May we have the ears to hear, the courage to drop what we're doing, and the hearts to follow.

Even so, come Lord Jesus.

Amen.