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Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA

Third Sunday after Epiphany

January 22, 2023

Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1, 4-9; I Cor. 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

I'd like to begin the sermon today by inviting you to hear a story from Melanie Cool, one of our members, who is a counselor with Lutheran Counseling Network, about how God called her to do what she is doing now.

MELANIE:

The day I injured my neck and lost the use of my right arm was the best day of my life.

What?! I know, I know, stay with me here.

I'd like to tell you a story...

When I was two years old my mom tells the story I put my Raggedy Ann doll in a chair and I said, "Tell me your problems."

I was clearly on the path to becoming a psychotherapist!

And I followed that path even to the point of getting a BA in psychology.

But.... you need a master's degree to become a psychotherapist and I was busy getting married and having children.

I even tried to go to graduate school a few times, but it just felt like too much.

Let's just say...I didn't live my life very intentionally

I worked a lot of different jobs and ended up as a manager for Wendy's. Anyone like Wendy's? It's good! All fresh.

Anyway, I was putting away heavy stock and suddenly something went very wrong in my neck and my right arm was hanging off my body.

In an instant my life was over. I found myself ruminating...I had no job, no income, no husband. I was a single mother of three boys, 9, 6, and 1. I couldn't care for myself or my children. And I was faced with a future of surgeries and disabilities.

Thank God for my parents!

Now here is where things get interesting....

I wanted to die. I felt hopeless. I felt helpless. I felt like a burden. I didn't have a plan on ending my life, but every night I went to bed wishing to not wake up.

One morning my son Mark, 6 at the time, came into my room and said, "Get up and make me breakfast!"

"Make your own breakfast." I said.

"I want you to make me breakfast!"

"Ask grandma to make you breakfast."

Mark put his hands on his hips and stomped his foot. He ripped the covers off me and said, "You are the mom, and it's your job to get up and make me breakfast!"

So... I got up and with one arm made Mark some cereal.

As I was pouring the the milk, I heard God.

Very clearly God said to me, "What can you do?"

What can I do? I thought.

I braced myself on the counter. I realized I had been thinking about everything that was wrong with my life. Everything I didn't have, everything I couldn't do. And a future of doom.

What can I do? I thought again. The words felt strange.

And then....I heard God again. Go to graduate school and complete your lifelong dream of becoming a counselor.

Suddenly I felt a sense of peace. I didn't even need to know the how, I just knew with all my being that was what I was going to do.

And with a lot of help from a lot of people, and digging deep for my own inner resilience, I did it.

So here I am today, doing what God always wanted me to do.

And my arm? Well, after many surgeries, I still don't have full use of my right arm and hand. But no one notices. I've adapted to be able to do what I want to do. My left hand does most of what I need it to do. And I've stopped trying to wave goodbye or give a thumbs up.

Interesting fact, I'm ambidextrous with chopsticks!

So here I am today, listening to God.

And there is no other place I'd rather be.

-- ME:

One of the things that I find so interesting about Melanie's story is that it was in a time of crisis that her true call emerged. It was when things were not going well in her life that she was most open to hearing God's call.

Now we don't know a lot about the fishermen in today's gospel who, according to Matthew, immediately dropped their nets and left their boat and their father to follow Jesus, to live out their true calling. But what we do know is what was happening historically at the time when Jesus called them.

You probably noticed that today's gospel starts with Jesus withdrawing to Galilee because John the Baptist had been arrested. Well, the reason that John had been arrested was that his preaching and teaching was a threat to the Roman Empire and the ruler Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great who had killed all the children under age 2 in Bethlehem after Jesus was born. This Herod was also threatened by John and by Jesus, and in chapter 14 of Matthew he ends up beheading John.

Living under Roman occupation and under Herod Antipas was stressful, and these fishermen were probably forced to give a certain amount of the fish they caught to the Roman Empire.

It was a time of crisis, when their lives weren't going well, that these disciples heard Jesus' call about a different kind of kingdom – the kingdom of heaven that had come near. A kingdom in which they didn't have to fish anymore to supply Rome, but rather to fish for people whom Jesus would cure and bring good news to.

Now my guess is that these fishermen had no idea what it really meant to fish for people when Jesus called them to do it, but they took the next faithful step by dropping their nets, leaving their boats, and going where Jesus went.

Following Jesus' call doesn't mean that you have to have everything in your life laid out perfectly, in fact, things might be a mess. And you might not know where the path Jesus is calling you to leads, but all Jesus asks you to do is follow him, to take the next faithful step.

Remember it took several chapters in the gospel of Matthew and several years in the lives of these disciples until they figured out exactly what it meant to fish for people, but when they faithfully listened to Jesus' call and took the next faithful step, Jesus gave them what they needed and led them on the way.

My dear friends in Christ, remember and trust that whatever God calls you to, God equips you for. God equipped Melanie, God equipped those disciples, and God equips you, even when you don't know exactly where the path will lead. Let us pray.

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us, and your love supporting us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.