

“The Door”

As long as I can remember I've enjoyed Bible study. That's not just because I am weird, but also because studying the Bible is so full of surprises. Usually a book or a passage or a lesson starts out looking as though it's going to be one thing and it ends up being something altogether different. The text begins as something cold and lifeless, filled with obscure words, obtuse references and distant places and peoples, and then some spark connects with contemporary tinder and... whoosh... nobody in the room has any eyebrows. It doesn't always go that way; but often enough that I keep coming back. The thing of it is, you never know where you'll end up. There probably should be some sort of warning label.

So one of my favorite times in any week is the staff Bible study we've got going among people who are preachers or worship leaders or just interested bystanders for the coming weekend. We do this every Tuesday afternoon at 2:00 in what used to be my office, now called the “Peace Conference Room.” (It's come a long way.) Not everybody present is going to preach. It's like the ham and egg breakfast: the hen is involved, but the pig is committed. Usually the preachers, the committed, have already done some work with the text, but not always. And there isn't usually much correlation between advanced preparation and contribution to the discussion.

This week we started very slowly, sort of kicking at the dirt with very little energy, picking up little pieces of things, looking at them from various vantage points and then setting them back down and looking for something else, more bemused than engaged. And then we felt something alarmingly familiar tugging at us from out of the text. We started sharing stories from our own lives. And the next thing anybody knew, we'd been at it for two hours. I don't intend to keep you that long this morning. But I do want to try to share something of the journey.

Matthew is describing a huge turning point for Jesus. Jesus is fresh from his temptation in the wilderness—actually he's exhausted from his temptation in the wilderness—when news reaches him that John the Baptist has been arrested. Apart from any personal concern for John, this news is troublesome on a number of levels. Maybe as little as six weeks ago Jesus has been with John, being baptized. If the authorities are rounding up followers of John, Jesus might be among them. If Jesus is John's successor in some respect, this could be the fate that awaits Jesus, too, and sooner rather than later. And clearly now the stage is empty. The opening act is done. The spotlight scours the darkness searching for Jesus.

But he withdraws. He goes back to Galilee. John the Baptist had been dealing with the big shots from Jerusalem and causing a high profile stir among the people of the Holy City. But Jesus will begin in a remote area and on more familiar territory, although he does move from his hometown of Nazareth to Capernaum, a fishing village on the shore of Lake Galilee. No sane prophet wants to begin too close to home.

Matthew emphasizes that Galilee has strong Gentile connections. Remember that Matthew gives us the Christmas story with the magi, who come from distant lands to announce that Jesus is more than simply a Jewish Messiah. This is “Galilee of the Gentiles,” Matthew wants us to understand; and he draws in a quotation from Isaiah 9 that almost-sort-of-kind-of-maybe fits the situation. I am tempted to draw in a different quotation, from Bill Coffin, to characterize Jesus’ beginnings in the boondocks. Coffin says, “People farthest from the centers of power are generally closest to the heart of things.”

There in Capernaum, Jesus begins to preach a minimalist message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” In Matthew, Jesus will spend a great deal of time teaching about what the kingdom of heaven means: that God is in charge, not Caesar; that Jesus’ followers are called to live in a whole new way summarized by the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount; that a new day has arrived for the poor and oppressed. But for now there’s just this summons to repent.

In Greek it’s a more provocative word. *Metanoia* means literally a “change of mind,” not in the sense of a new decision but in the sense of a whole new being. *Metanoia* is coming to a new life. It’s like stepping through a door, out of one existence and into another. “Repent” doesn’t really capture this: we associate repentance with remorse and even regret. But *metanoia* is oriented toward the future. Step through the door and into a new life because God is in charge now. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

The story that follows of Jesus calling the first disciples is a brief description of what happens when this message collides with real human lives. What does *metanoia* look like in action? Let’s see *metanoia* in motion.

Here Matthew seems to disappoint us. Usually we can count on Matthew to embellish what Mark has written. Mark wrote first, and we’re used to his quick, almost anxious brush strokes, his stick figure style that leaves so much to the imagination. Mark is all faint sketches and deep shadows and we have to fill in the detail. The other gospels often tell the same stories, but with more style and dash. Not here, though. Matthew follows Mark very closely, adding almost nothing.

Jesus says to Andrew and to Simon Peter, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” This would be an almost playful invitation, were it not so wildly ironic. Come with me and you can keep doing exactly what you’re doing only it will be completely different. Step out of one life and into another. Get out of your boat and step through the door. And they do.

In Peter’s case, this will mean leaving behind at least a mother-in-law, and presumably also a wife, as well. In the case of the Zebedee brothers, who are next, they leave their father behind in the boat tending the nets. Matthew even includes Mark’s favorite word, “immediately,” to describe this transition, if you could call it that.

They just leave their father behind. They also leave us behind a little bit, don’t they? We’re standing there and sputtering away, filled with questions the terse narrative won’t touch. What about their families? How will they make a living? Do they really know they will never come back? Did they have a prior relationship with Jesus? Is this all

there is to it? And then there's the most troubling question, Does this really happen? Is this the way God works? Simon and Andrew, James and John, are these real people? Could Jesus do this to me?

So on Tuesday we found ourselves asking: Have we known *metanoia* moments, moments that are like stepping through a door, out of one life and into another? Are there clearly defined points in our lives that amount to this sort of "follow me" and "immediately" story? You step through the door, and everything familiar somehow looks different. Everything *is* different. There is no turning back. Is that how it works?

In the staff Bible study we all had stories of such moments. I suspect the sanctuary is filled with similar stories today.

In 1977 I moved from Connecticut to Omaha to go to First Central Congregational Church to work with Newell Davis, whose widow Miriam is now a beloved member of this congregation and one of our dearest friends in the world. I had been in Omaha less than a week when Newell and I went to have lunch with a church member at Mutual of Omaha, just a block and a half from the church. After lunch we were walking back that short distance and Newell had to stop half a dozen times to catch his breath. He told me that the next day he had an appointment with a doctor. And it went through me like a bolt of lightning: "This dear man is going to die!" I fought with it, I suppressed it, I denied it, I ignored it, but I knew in the depths of my being that it was true. I was so sad. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to run away and hide. But I had stepped through a door and there was no turning back. And the prayer that bubbled up in me was something like, "Dear God, get me out of here. What have you done to me?" Of course it was about me.

One day in something like September of 1993 I was running up Happy Hollow Boulevard in Omaha and even though I was less than a block from completing my run I suddenly just stopped in my tracks. Despite the fact that I was sweating profusely, a chill went through me. At that point I think I had had two or three telephone conversations with the person Priscilla was starting to call "that strange man." It was David Nelson, who was chairing the Plymouth Search Committee. And the clear as day message there on Happy Hollow Boulevard was, "This Plymouth thing is going to happen. And I'm supposed to say Yes." A flood of inner protest swept over me. "I don't want to move. We love it here. The kids love their school. Priscilla just started in a new practice." And all those things were very real. If Priscilla had refused to move, I'm sure we would have stayed in Omaha. But she didn't. And, honestly, from that moment it felt as though I had stepped through a door, out of one life and into another.

It happened again about three years ago, while I was sitting at the stoplight at 35th and Grand, right lane, facing west, at about 8:40 in the morning. A sudden moment of clarity: "Ruhe, you're not the young guy any more." Everywhere I've been, I've been the young guy. When I came here, I was the young guy, a generation younger than Jim Gilliom. But it was abundantly clear to me in that moment that Plymouth Church did not need me to be the young guy any more, unless we were all going to age together and die. I needed to surround myself with younger colleagues, get out of the way more and more and let them shine, do everything I could to help them succeed and become for the Plymouth community something more like a... I can hardly say this without giggling... a

sage. Mind you, I had no idea what a sage is. (Maybe I needed a sage coach!) I just knew in that moment that I was going to have to learn to be something different. I stepped through a door. And I'm still figuring it out.

Stepping through a door does not resolve all difficulties. It's quite the opposite. Stepping through a door creates a host of complications, many of which take years to resolve. But all the while the chaos is swirling around you, there is a center of calm in the middle that comes from knowing that the mess you're dealing with is at least the right mess. There's energy for it. There's hope to it. There's new life in there, even when things are falling apart.

This is in marked contrast to clinging to the mess you're in because you're afraid to step through the door. Jesus said "Follow me" and immediately they turned their backs and took sudden renewed interest in their tangled nets. I've been there, too. There's no life there. But stepping through the door means embracing the future it promises, as if to say, "I have no idea where this leads, but I know I've got to go there." "Immediately they left the boat and their father, and they followed him."

God does this in all our lives. God may do it to you today. I have no idea how to get ready for this, other than to entertain the possibility that it might happen. Goodness knows we don't make it happen, and we're painfully skilled at resisting when it does. But more often than we are willing to acknowledge in life God calls us to new life, to *metanoia*. New life calls. Jesus says, "Follow me." Step through the door.

Amen

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