

*"As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, 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." Matt. 4:18-19*

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### Using What You Know

What is this call to follow Jesus: "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people"?

What did Jesus have in mind? And what did those fishermen, the first disciples, think they were being asked to do? What are we being asked to do?

The story can be off-putting for us moderns. "Follow me!" It sounds more like a command than an invitation.

"I will make you fish for people"? Do you imagine nets thrown over the unsuspecting, trapping them, or barbed hooks hidden under appealing morsels, hoisting us from the waters where we make our home?

We don't want to "catch" others, or be "caught," like a fish.

You yourself may, at another time in your life, have felt the lure of a faith community where everyone at first feels so caught up together, but where eventually, you felt ensnared and constrained, urged to obey rather than exercise independent judgment, asked to just believe rather than ask questions. The kind of a faith community where all must believe this, must do that, must exclude and condemn others who don't share the approved views.

If that's what being a follower of Jesus means, or a fisher for people, many of us here want none of that.

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But there's another interpretation of what Jesus was saying when he called his first disciples. Not that he wanted us all to be fishermen, to net people like fish, but that each of us, in our chosen arenas -- of fishing or finance, real estate or retirement -- can use our special skills and life experiences to build God's beloved community.

That by calling us to follow, our minds need not be shut off, falling into rote step behind a leader, but that our minds will be opened, used more fully than we might ever have imagined, in a new way, reaching others who might have seemed beyond our hands' grasp, seen by some even a lost cause.

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Looking back, John Aldridge knew it was a stupid move. When you're alone on the deck of a lobster boat in the middle of the night, 40 miles off the tip of Long Island, you don't take chances.

But he had work to do: He needed to start pumping water into the Anna Mary's holding tanks to chill, so that when he and his [business] partner, Anthony, reached their first string of traps a few miles farther south, the water would be cold enough to keep the lobsters alive for the return trip.

In order to get to the [holding] tanks, he had to ...[move]... two giant plastic insulated ice chests that he['d] filled [seven hours earlier] before leaving the dock in Montauk harbor... The coolers [each]... weighed...200 pounds and the only way for [John] to move them alone was to snag a [large] hook onto the plastic handle of the bottom one, brace his legs, lean back and pull with all his might.

And then the handle snapped.

Suddenly [John] was flying backward, tumbling across the deck toward the back of the boat, which was wide open, just a flat, slick ramp leading straight into the black ocean a few inches below...

The water hit him like a slap...He yelled as loudly as he could, hoping to wake [Anthony], who was asleep on a bunk below the front deck. But the diesel engine was too loud, and the Anna Mary, on autopilot, mov[ed] due south at six and a half knots...its navigation lights receding into the night... He was alone in the darkness....

Those words are the opening paragraphs of The New York Times Sunday Magazine piece that ran on January 2<sup>nd</sup> this year. It's entitled "A Speck in the Sea," and tells the wildly improbable, but true story of what it took last summer to find John Aldridge, a fisherman from Long Island, in the waters of the North Atlantic, though he was only a speck rising and falling in five foot swells.

The worst problem was figuring out where John had gone overboard, and therefore where others should search for him. John had already been in the water for three hours, when Anthony, and the one other mate they'd hired to help with the lobster traps, awoke at 6 AM. The boat was now 60 miles offshore, more than 15 miles past their traps, and John was missing. He hadn't awoken Anthony at the appointed time, 11:30 pm.

Anthony's usually jocular voice was shaking when he sound the distress signal. In New Haven, the Coast Guard answered, and called up the search and rescue computer program. They calculated a survival simulation: given John's height and weight, the weather and water temperature (72 degrees), John could he stay afloat for at most, 19 hours. But very few people in John's situation -- without a flotation device -- lasted more than 3 or 4.

As in all search and rescue situations, the community gathered: not only those who knew John and Anthony from their home port of Montauk, Long Island, but the wider community on the seas. A distress signal goes to all mariners in the area.

Coast guard search helicopters and an airplane went in the air from Boston and Cape Cod. A cutter from New York Harbor turned and headed east toward where John might be. In Montauk, nearly all the other fishermen wanted to help. One took that day's deep sea fishing customers back to the dock, so he could head out on the search. Another got his customer -- Jimmy Buffet -- to agree to have their boat join the search rather than fish for tuna. 21 commercial boats from the Montauk area joined the hunt.

But with such little data about the time that John had fallen in, and where the boat had been at that point, taking into account the currents and wind, the possible search areas was huge: 30 miles wide, and 60 miles north to south. It was impossibly big, even for their flotilla of searcher. They'd be looking for a small head bobbing in the water, somewhere within 1800 square miles of ocean, an area the size of Rhode Island.

They did their best to narrow the range, identifying the highest probability areas, and the computer developed search patterns for each boat and plane being used: a square or rectangle within which they were to hunt.

But they were looking in the wrong place, 30 miles away from where John really was, because they'd wrongly assumed he'd fallen off at 10:30 pm, when in reality, it'd been five hours later, at 3:30 in the morning.

Meanwhile, in the water, John had seen shark fins, but they'd swum away. He'd pulled off his huge rubber boots, turned them upside down, and captured air inside them. With one under each arm, they became flotation devices.

Once daylight came, John used his knowledge of the fishing industry, search processes, and his own calculations of where he'd fallen off, to identify whose lobster buoys might be close. Buoys were something else he could stay afloat on, and a way to be more visible to searchers.

For a few hours he drifted and watched: each time a swell raised him up five feet, he'd look. When he saw a buoy a few hundreds yards away, he began swimming

towards it, but with his boots underarm, and the current against him, it was exhausting and too slow; he fell further away.

Knowing that lobster buoys are usually laid out east to west, a mile apart, John decided to swim with the current toward where the next buoy should be, and he found it. Now John could keep afloat, on the stationary lobster buoy.

Above, the search planes were closer to John now. Why? Because both the Coast Guard search officer, and John's fishing partner Anthony, aboard the lobster trawler, had had second thoughts about when John had likely fallen overboard.

The Coast Guard leader, who himself had fished commercially, radioed the Anna Mary directly and said to Anthony, "Talk to me, Captain, fisherman to fisherman. Help me reduce this search area."

Sharing the language of Long Island fishermen, both with long years on the water, and Anthony knowing his best friend John's habits, Anthony speculated that John might have done this crazy thing – let Anthony sleep well past the agreed wake up time while John alone prepared the boat for the long day's catch, planning to let Anthony sleep in until just before they reached their traps. Fisherman for fisherman. Friend for friend.

Anthony also had found the broken cooler handle and guessed what had happened: John would only have begun moving the coolers, in order to fill the holding tank below with cold water, when they were closer to the first lobster traps, about 3 AM. Armed with this new information, a new search pattern had been calculated by the Coast Guard's computer. Now they were close to John, but not yet close enough.

Below, in the ocean, John saw the search airplanes a mile away, and realized those searching must be assuming he was still drifting, not clinging to a stationary buoy. So John cut the buoy loose, and somehow swam yet another mile distant, to yet another buoy, roped the two buoys together, and straddled the rope between them, lifting himself higher out of the water. John was desperately thirsty, his skin was badly sunburned, and his body was chilled to the bone.

And then the Coast Guard computer crashed. The search had been so long, with so many assets, it had overloaded. A tired helicopter crew was ordered to head home; they'd been out for 6 or 7 hours, staring at the water, and in one more hour, they'd have to return anyway, because their fuel was running out.

But the copter crew argued: give us something to do for the remaining hour. We're out here anyway. So a search pattern was manually drawn, a pattern that 12 minutes later went right over the spot where John was, still alive. He'd been found!

All the fishermen, at sea or on land, later admitted it: when they heard the good news, they cried.

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“As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus saw two brothers...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.”

Friends, when Jesus talked to the fishermen, there along the shores of the Galilee, he hoped they'd use the talents they had, not some talents they didn't have. He asked the fishermen to fish...

Just as the Coast Guard leader urged Anthony: “Captain, talk to me, fisherman to fisherman.” Together, they used their knowledge of the sea, and of the missing sailor John, to create a more accurate scenario, to plot more accurate search coordinates. They spoke fisherman to fisherman, so one who was lost, could be found.

Just as the helicopter crew asserted, ‘Let us do stay out one more hour and do what we do best – search!’

Just as the lobsterman John, overboard in the vast ocean, used his experience to fashion floating devices from his rubber boots, to find the buoys of the other lobstermen, to float or swim with the current into what he gleaned was the search zone.

Just as the community of fishermen from Montauk harbor dropped whatever they were doing, because to them John was not just a speck in the ocean, but part of their beloved community.

What saved John, lost in the darkness of the vast ocean? How did a light shine there? By people using their particular skills and experience, together, to reach out and save one others might have deemed a lost cause.

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God has you given each of you talents and gifts. Kim preached about it last week. You've each also had certain life experiences – some harsh and humbling, some enriching and radiant.

There are some currents in life, as mysterious to others as the currents of the ocean are to those not boaters. But you've learned to navigate *your* life's currents. There are some markers on the journey, like buoys on the sea, and you recognize them.

With your array of talents and experiences, to what are you being called, these days? Who is adrift on high seas and feels like just a speck in the vast darkness, in this neighborhood, in this city?

Betsy Petersen took her experience as the wife of a beloved man dying of Alzheimer's, and has a ministry in this area, though I know she'll protest this description. But I've seen it in action.

Those of you who sing gift us each week with your offerings: you're the buoy in many lives, keeping them afloat. Who else could we invite in to hear you?

A woman I knew at another church took her harrowing experience of cancer, and from it developed special work: first leading an ongoing small group at the church, where people gathered to share with others who understood their disease; then beginning to sit daily with those receiving chemo infusions at the hospital, talking or just holding their hand; and now, serving as a trained chaplain, serving cancer patients and their families at a large Boston hospital.

Here at King's Chapel, many of us have suffered from divorce, and may, at some time, be able to walk with others in that darkness, perhaps through a small group for those who feel as if they are drowning in the cold choppy waters of that grief.

In this age when Christians and churches far more often bring harm rather than healing, we at King's Chapel have a call to be Christians who use our minds to dig for truth; to use our arms to embrace the wisdom of all the world's traditions; to use our lips to welcome everyone, regardless of race, immigrant status, or whom they want to marry; to use our feet and hearts and hands to insist on justice for everyone, that God's beloved community includes all, that no one should ever be treated like a meaningless speck upon the ocean.

We will build beloved community, so that at least some who come within these walls, who see our works in this city, will say, "See how they love one another." Maybe what they are doing, who they are, the One whom they follow, \is worth my following, too.

That's how the world changes. That's how we build beloved community.

Amen.