

Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Gospel Year A

FAME, FORTUNE, AND FISHES

Matthew 4:12-23

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Analysis by Matthew DeLoera

¹²Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

*¹⁵"Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—*

*¹⁶the 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."*

¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

¹⁸As 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 sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁹And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." ²⁰Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹As 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. ²²Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

23 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.



DIAGNOSIS: The Problem with Immortality

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): The Same Old Thing

For his 1974 book entitled *Working*, Studs Terkel interviewed over 100 men and women about their daily work, and how they felt about it. Mike, a steelworker, says, "How are you gonna get excited about pullin' steel? How you gonna get excited when you're tired and want to sit down?" Phil, an assembly-line worker, talks about working a line that just keeps going. "I bet there's men who have lived and died out there, never seen the end of that line. And they never will—because it's endless." What might Terkel have thought about life at an Amazon fulfillment center, or on an iPhone manufacturing line?

Peter, Andrew, James, and John are all going about their daily business of cast-net fishing. This is hard and repetitive work—requiring skill to throw the net correctly so it opens upon hitting the water, and strong backs to draw back the net with its catch. Afterward, the net was spread on shore for drying and mending before they made another go. Of course, emergencies always happen. Fixing a net while in your cramped boat is begging for mistakes and frustration, but you do what you have to do to get the job done. The nets won't just cast themselves. Day in, and day out, they keep at the same thing, but surely they must have their own thoughts about it.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Searching for More

What keeps us at our work? Sure, we all have immediate needs, but is that all? After so many conversations, Terkel wrote about “a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor.” The gospel doesn't tell us the thoughts of these fishermen, but we can anticipate the weight of responsibility on their shoulders to support their extended families. Did they ever hope for recognition or meaning? We don't know, but for them to so “immediately” walk off the job and follow a perfect stranger with such a vague offer (do we always understand metaphors?), we have to imagine that they are looking for more than yet another haul of fish. Responsibilities be damned, since we don't know that they've given any thought as to who will pick up their slack, though Zebedee likely wonders.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): We Are Forgettable

Terkel wondered, “Perhaps immortality is part of the quest. To be remembered was the wish, spoken and unspoken, of the heroes and heroines of this book.” Tom, a firefighter, says, “It shows

I did something on this earth.” In my own middle-age, I find myself restless, less satisfied with tackling yet another business crisis that won’t even be remembered tomorrow. In truth, Isaiah was right. We sit in darkness, because we can’t know whether any of our toil or struggle will ever be remembered or make a difference in the long run, let alone cause harm. History tells us as much—not that we listen. But, we do know that death is a great equalizer. As we futilely seek our own immortality, God leaves us to it.

PROGNOSIS: The Joy of Resurrection

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Jesus Remembers Us



Yet, God is not done with us. Isaiah continues, “The people who

sat in darkness have seen a great light.” In this way, Jesus went throughout Galilee, “proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease.” They did not seek him, but he sought them in order to give them a Word: “Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near.” This is the only truly eternal Word, for even as Jesus went to the cross to die our death, the light of his glorious resurrection shines upon us now, and we will never again sit in darkness. After all, we did not seek him, but he sought us, and not once but ever again, always repeating the same promise to us and constantly pulling us back to repentance. Jesus will surely have what he wants.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): We Are More Than This

By this repentance, this “change of mind” (imperative, metanoeite) imparted by Jesus’ gift of faith, we finally realize that immortality is nothing more than exactly what we have now, which isn’t much of anything at all (not what Studs may have had in mind). But, resurrection is something completely different. By Jesus’ resurrection we are astonished to behold a new creation borne in our bodies. As new creations, we now rejoice to know that we are eternally recognized by God in the communion of saints. But let’s be clear—this is not some kind of self-delusion or spiritual scrapbook or insurance policy. Rather, there’s something indescribably powerful about recognizing our unique place in the whole story of unfolding creation with the saints who have passed before us. These folks hung absolutely everything on a faith that assures their lives were not in vain. And every time they come to mind, we remember that our lives are not in vain either (*here’s to you, Tom!*).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): All Things Made New

Freed from the need to make a name for ourselves or secure some

kind of posthumous remembrance, we finally start to notice our neighbors in their own needs, here and now, one day at a time. Of course, Jesus aims his promise to us as he did to those first disciples, that we would “fish for people.” But, when you think about it, we don’t even really have to do any fishing at all, because these folks have surrounded us for our whole lives. Yes, service can be hard work, and we’ll never see the end of it (sorry, Phil!). The host of neighbors is endless. Even so, we give thanks that we can literally give the rest of our lives away for the sake and joy (looking at you, Mike!) of serving them, “for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near.”