

Fish Paste
Matthew 4:12-25
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North Decatur Presbyterian Church
David Lewicki, preaching

We've been working our way through Matthew's story of Jesus. We've seen him baptized in chapter 3 and then pushed by the Spirit of God into the wilderness in chapter 4, where he was tested by the Tempter. But Jesus passed that test. He re-affirmed our covenant relationship with God—what it means for us to be God's Beloved. Now, as we begin chapter 4, the adult Jesus is ready to begin his ministry. Pay attention to *where* he goes, *who* he meets, and *what* he says and does.

¹² Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³ He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴ so 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—

¹⁶ the 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."

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

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

²³ Jesus^[c] went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news^[d] of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. ²⁴ So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, people possessed by demons or having epilepsy or afflicted with paralysis, and he cured them. ²⁵ And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

There's a lot going on in this passage. But let's look at it on a 30,000 foot level.

(Image: Map)

Where does Jesus go? We are told Jesus leaves Nazareth and makes a new home in Capernaum. Where's that? Let's look at a map. Jesus, at his baptism, is somewhere down in Judea, in the south. But we are told that John the Baptist has been arrested, so Jesus feels like he needs to get out of Dodge. He goes north, to Capernaum, which is on the Sea of Galilee, a 7x11 mile lake at the other end of the Jordan. That's where the beginning of Jesus' ministry happens.

Who does he meet? He meets the people who live in Capernaum, and in the towns around the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Most specifically, we know Jesus meets Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John. Two pairs of brothers. And it's no coincidence that these men, who live alongside this big, beautiful body of water are engaged in the bucolic,

(fish photo)

pastoral work of fishing. Jesus meets a couple of hearty, bronze-skinned fishermen, ready for an adventure. Right? Maybe.

But let's see if we can take a closer look at what's going on here by focusing in on what Jesus does. What does Jesus do? Matthew says his very first words are "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*" First words are important. They are kind of shorthand for the larger message that follows. What does this message mean, "repent, the kingdom of heaven has come near?" For one, it's not originally Jesus'. If you were paying attention, this is exactly what John was saying to folks back in chapter 3, when he was drawing people to the Jordan River for a life-changing plunge into the water. Jesus took these words and embraced them as his own. Many people think Jesus was first a disciple of John's—he learned from John. I like that image very much—because it both roots Jesus in his community and also in a lineage of a deep wisdom tradition. Even Jesus doesn't just drop in from heaven—Jesus has roots. Jesus learns from teachers and elders and mentors.

"Repent," Jesus says. You know what this means: "turn." What is it to turn? It's to face a different direction, to go in a different way. To orient your life by different cues.

Why would someone turn? Why would someone heed these words? What makes any of us change our lives? That's the key question in this chapter. Why do these men, these fishermen, why do they look up from their boats when this stranger starts talking? Why do they drop their nets? Why do they put down their life's work? Why do they give up their livelihood? Why, for crying out loud, do they leave their aging father in the boat to do this physically demanding work by himself? What on earth did they hear Jesus saying?

I've always struggled with the ease by which these men leave everything to follow Jesus. Why do they turn away from fishing, and turn toward Jesus when he says, "the kingdom of heaven is at hand?"

The answer could, very possibly, be "fish paste."

(fish paste photo)

Fish paste.

Garum, it was called in those days. Garum is a fermented fish sauce that was used throughout the Roman Empire as a condiment. Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John very possibly followed Jesus because of fish paste.

Clear, right? No?

Let's talk a little more about fish paste. Let's talk about how you make it. There are lots of different recipes. But basically, you basically take a bunch of small fish or their guts and you salt them and you put them out in the blazing sun. After they've dried, you kind of run them through a filtering process. And the flavorful oil that drains out is called liquamen. And it was a delicacy. It's got an umami flavor—like Worcestershire sauce. Garum was a hit. This stuff was eaten all over the Roman Empire. Garum—fish paste—was the ketchup of ancient Rome. It was eaten by all classes of people. There was thick, cheap fish paste that poor folks enjoyed. And there was a fine grade of garum that cost huge sums of money and was eaten by the elites.

Take one guess where there was a big Roman fish paste factory. On the Sea of Galilee. The capital of the region was Bethsaida, which means “house of the fisherman.” The Greek name for Magdala on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee was Tarichaeae, which means “Fish Cannery-ville” or “Processed Fish-ville.”

Fishing is the heart of the Galilean economy. But this is not a free market. It's not like you've got a bunch of swarthy, good-natured independent fishermen, trolling out into the harbor every day to bring their catch and take it to market, sell it for profit, and then going home to eat a couple of bronzino grilled on an open fire.

No, this is Roman Empire. You know how empires work. Empires go in and conquer a place, then figure out what natural resources exist there. They set up operations to exploit those natural resources for maximal profit, which all flows upward toward the seat of the empire. Fishing on the Sea of Galilee is an elite-profitting state-run enterprise. Archaeologists and historians are still working to piece together how industries like the fishing industry on the Sea of Galilee worked. But you should imagine a system in which only a small number of families are given licenses to fish. Everyone else fishes illegally. These “legal” fishermen aren't exactly independent either. They are probably capitalized by the elites—the elites may own the boats and the nets. The “legal” fishermen are constantly working—grueling, precarious labor, day in and day out. They don't control their prices, they are taxed on every part of their business. They work every day for profits that are never guaranteed. The fish they catch are delivered to factories nearby, where they are turned into fish paste. Maybe even fine fish paste that gets exported back to Rome to please the taste buds of rich people who depend on suffering fisherman for the finest delicacies their ill-gotten money can buy.

We don't know exactly what kind of life Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John were leading. We don't know where in this exploitative fishing economy they were situated. But could they have been part of the families granted fishing rights? Could they have been trying to eke out a living with ever-shrinking margins as Roman tax collectors extracted their cut, as the

elite buyers offered less and less for a catch, while creditors were knocking demanding their payments for the boats and the nets?

In the Christian tradition, we have traditionally spiritualized the call of Jesus' disciples. We tend to think that it was the sound of his voice or the glint in his eye that motivated men and women to drop their nets and turn and follow him. I don't want to disparage Jesus. I'm sure he had that certain "je ne sais quoi."

But it is just as likely that these men were suffering under the Romans and their Herodian client kings and the whole network of crony tax collectors who squeezed them for every last bit of profit. The fishermen on the Sea of Galilee were pawns in a game, doing grueling, dangerous work every day for what? To make fish paste enjoyed the Roman elites?

Then, one day, they see a man on the shore nearby. This man begins telling them an old, old story. It's story is about God... who created this world and all that is in it—the sun and the moon and the stars and seas and the fish in those seas. In that good world that God creates, the earth is sufficient to provide food for everyone. The man says in the world that God creates, the work of our hands is honest—we tend the garden and fish the sea—and we get to enjoy the fruit of our labor. By this time, the fishermen are listening. And the man goes on with the story. He says, "remember a long time ago, when God heard our cries when we were enslaved in Egypt, and God came to deliver us; God brought us out of the hands of our oppressors and brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey. Into this very land. And remember how God commanded us to take care of one another—to ensure everyone had daily bread, and to ensure that the poor would never be hungry, and to ensure that debts were forgiven so no one lived in debt slavery. Do you remember that story?," Jesus asks these fishermen.

They do. And then Jesus says, "This story I am telling you is the story of the Kingdom of God. The empire of God. That empire is here. Put down your nets. Abandon this cruelty. Follow me. We will live in God's kingdom together."

I don't think Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John needed much convincing. They knew the story Jesus was telling. It was a true story. It was their story. And the kingdom he described was far more beautiful than the one with the boot on their necks.

Following Jesus is a spiritual practice. But do a great and tragic harm when we try and portray the kingdom of God as though it has no economic or political implications. The kingdom of heaven is an alternative economic and political reality. Following Jesus was an act of revolutionary courage.

I have said this before, and I'll say it again—we no longer live in the Roman Empire. But that doesn't mean the kind of exploitation that provoked those fishermen to drop their nets no longer exists. Where else do we see people and resources exploited?

Images:

Clothing factories
Amazon warehouse
Farm fields

What does it mean for us—in this place, to hear Jesus’ message again today? “Repent—turn—for the kingdom of heaven—and all that the kingdom brings—has come near.”

What does it mean for you to lay down your net and follow?