



Sunday, January 25, 2026

Matthew 4:12-23 (Third Sunday after the Epiphany)

Ascension Lutheran Church

Pastor Tony Acompnado

When I graduated from seminary, people wanted to know about my call story and the journey that took me from law enforcement and community counseling, to becoming a director of faith formation and on to seminary to become a pastor. “Tell us the story of how you got here,” they said. “Tell us about your encounter with God and how you became a pastor.” Each time I began, there was a moment of silence as I thought about how to answer the question. And then I’d begin, “As much as I didn’t really give any thought to becoming a pastor, I guess it was just always there – a sense of connection to God and always feeling like I was being called to something more. And no matter how much I tried to ignore or run from this call on my life and live the life I *thought* I wanted, I can’t actually remember a time in my life when it *wasn’t* there.” Some of them would go on to ask, “So, was there something in particular that motivated you?” “Well, yes and no. In hindsight there were many things along the way – experiencing racism and bullying, being told in catholic school that I had to believe a certain way and couldn’t ask questions, the hypocrisy in the church, my sister-in-law getting murdered, feeling like a failure, counseling abused teenagers, my dad’s journey with cancer, making life altering choices, becoming a dad, the death of two students.” When I begin to share people often look stunned in disbelief and some would even apologize for asking. I’d go on to say that there’s no need to apologize...these are just some of the moments in my life when God reminded me that God was there with me all along, that I was enough, that God loved me, and that God still had incredible things planned for me/my life.

I think these conversations about my call story highlight one of the difficulties with today’s gospel. It sounds as if one day Jesus shows up and immediately we walk away from our old life and leave everything behind. At least that’s how Matthew describes it for Peter and Andrew, James and John in today’s gospel. And while I don’t doubt the truth of this story. I imagine that’s how it may have happened for some of you as well. But it’s not the only way. Some of you would describe a story similar to mine; a continuous and steady experience of Jesus. While others might tell a story of struggle and wrestling, give and take, back and forth. In truth our lives are probably a mixture of all three of those plus many others. How does any relationship begin, continue, or grow? There’s no one way or even a *right* way. There are probably as many ways of being called, finding Jesus, being found by Jesus, or whatever you want to call it, as there are people. It’s unique and personal to each one of us. The point, however, isn’t *how* it happened but that it *did happen* and it continues to happen. And it’s never a one and done kind of thing. Our entire life is a call story. We are always and forever being called, shaped, and formed into the likeness of Jesus. Over and over again Jesus comes to us saying, “Follow me.”

But following Jesus doesn’t happen in the theoretical and intellectual, rather it takes place in the real, everyday context, circumstances, and relationships of our lives. Our relationship with Jesus is grounded and experienced in the people and events of our lives and the world.

The same way it was for Peter, Andrew, James, and John. We see that throughout the remainder of Matthew’s gospel. He not only describes the life and ministry of Jesus but the ongoing shaping and forming of Peter, Andrew, James, and John’s lives. That shaping and forming happened in Jesus’ teaching of the beatitudes, in his healing of the sick, in his telling parables, in his feeding of the 5000, in Peter complaining that they’d left everything behind, in James and John arguing with the others and hoping to sit at Jesus’ right and left, in Jesus’ crucifixion, in his resurrection and ascension, and in the coming of the Holy Spirit. Every one of those moments echoes with Jesus’ words, “*Follow me.*” Every one of those is as much a turning point in the lives of Peter, Andrew, James, and John as was the day Jesus first saw them by the Sea of Galilee. Turning points always thunder with the invitation to follow Jesus. And isn’t that exactly what’s happening in today’s gospel? We hear it in Jesus’ words. He only says two things: “Repent,” and “Follow me.” And in some way they feel like the two sides of a coin.



Sunday, January 25, 2026

Matthew 4:12-23 (Third Sunday after the Epiphany)

Ascension Lutheran Church

Pastor Tony Acompanado

So often we hear the word “repentance” and think, “Uh oh, someone’s been bad. Someone better change their evil ways.” And yes, it can mean *that*, and sometimes *that* needs to be the focus, but it also means more than that. Repentance is more than just a moral change. It is a life change, a turning point. After all, repentance does mean to turn around. To look in a different direction. To see with new eyes. To establish new priorities. To travel a new road. The turning points of our lives bring us face to face with Jesus and they come in lots of ways. Sometimes they come as we planned, worked, and hoped for. Other times they’re completely unexpected and take us by surprise. Sometimes they bring us happiness and joy. Other times we’re filled with sorrow and loss. Sometimes they affirm everything we thought and believed. Other times they leave us confused and not knowing what we believe. I’m guessing that you’ve probably experienced all of those and more in the turning points of your own life. Think about *your* turning points – times when, for better or worse, your life was turned around:

Moving out and beginning life on your own,
Falling in love and getting married,
The birth of a child,
The death of a loved one,
Words or actions that hurt another and forever changed the relationship,
Graduating from school and beginning your first job,
The failure of your business or the loss of your job,
Realizing your relationship or marriage is coming to an end,
A success or accomplishment that was really significant or meaningful,
Discovering the passion that excites and drives your life,
Receiving a diagnosis you didn’t expect or desire,
Going to your first AA meeting,
Being thrust into a new role as caretaker of your spouse or parent,
A longtime dream that finally came true.

The list could go on and on. We could all tell stories of our life’s turning points. It seems as if our lives are a series of turning points, some big and others small. And with each turning point we see ourselves, others, and the world differently, we think differently, we focus on different concerns, we ask different questions, and we move in different directions. What they all have in common, however, is Jesus’ invitation to follow him.

Each turning point comes with the opportunity for and the promise of Jesus to reshape our lives. That’s what Jesus did for Peter, Andrew, James, and John. “*I will make you...*,” he says. And that’s what he does for all of us. He makes us more into who we were created to be. But this doesn’t happen *in spite of our life’s circumstances* but rather *in and through our life’s circumstances*. That’s where and how it happened for Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Their turning point came in sailing the same boats, on the same lake, using the same nets, doing the same work they had done the day before, and the day before that, and the month before that, and the year before that. Take a moment to look at the circumstances of your life. What is the turning point you’re facing today? What’s happening? What do you see? Somewhere in your life today is a turning point – a place of repentance. Maybe you know exactly what it is. Maybe you just haven’t recognized it yet. Maybe you’ve closed your eyes to it. Regardless, it’s there – and so is Jesus, reaching, calling, longing, desiring. He’s standing there saying, “Follow me. I’ve chosen you.”

It took me a long time to choose to trust God to guide my path, and follow him so that I could begin fully living out this call on my life. So what are you going to do? Are you going to turn around? Or will you just keep going in the same direction...running toward who others or the world think you should be, or toward the one God created you to be? The choice is yours. Thanks be to God! Amen.