

Open and Willing
January 25, 2026
The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

“I am willing” by Holly Near

*I am open and I am willing
To be hopeless would seem so strange
It dishonors those who go before us
So lift me up to the light of change*

*There is hurting in my family
There is sorrow in my town
There is panic in the nation
There is wailing the whole world round*

*May the children see more clearly
May the elders be more wise
May the winds of change caress us
Even though it burns our eyes*

*Give me a mighty oak to hold my confusion
Give me a desert to hold my fears
Give me a sunset to hold my wonder
Give me an ocean to hold my tears*

Many of Holly’s songs have been running through my mind this past week.

This song in particular struck me as I thought about the disciples in this morning’s gospel text who Matthew tells us got up “immediately” and followed Jesus when he called them

What was it that made it seemingly so easy for them to get up and leave everything *immediately* to go with Jesus?

Was it something he said?

Was it something they had already wanted to do?

To be honest, I think it has everything to do with what Jesus said *and* I think it has everything to do with what was already in their hearts

This text in Matthew is referred to as “the calling of Jesus’ first disciples” and it doesn’t get that title just because of the physical act of calling these disciples, although certainly Jesus did that when he yelled out to them, but also the deeper spiritual calling that is manifest in this moment

This spiritual sense of calling speaks to moments when you feel a tugging, a nudging, a yearning in your body, mind, and spirit to go a certain way and follow a certain path

A calling that originates from God is an invitation into the way of God and that seems to be the kind of calling we glimpse this morning between Jesus and his first disciples

Frederick Buechner, American theologian and minister, describes calling as “the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet”

Simon and Andrew, James and John respond *immediately* to Jesus because, I think, this is the kind of calling they experience at the lakeshore – there was a coming together of Jesus’ invitation and the desire of their hearts

But, notice it doesn’t say they got up “assuredly” or they left “confidently”

There was an immediate knowing that they experienced, so they got up swiftly, but I can only imagine there was trepidation – a combination of hopeful wonder and desire to participate without really knowing what would happen

To me, this is what Holly Near's refrain embodies – not assurance, but hope; not even really confidence, but a willing spirit

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So, what was it that Jesus said that triggered in them such desire to respond?

Matthew tells us that the first words of Jesus' ministry are "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

At first glance this doesn't sound like the rallying call we might expect that would make these four men jump to their feet and leave everything behind

But, as we take a deeper dive perhaps it's exactly the kind of message we also yearn to hear

New Testament scholar, Eugene Park, notes that "the 'Kingdom of God'" Jesus speaks about here in Matthew "derives from the Hebrew phrase *makkhut Yahweh* ("rule of Yahweh")...it projects the vision of the political order of the imagined direct rule of God; the rulers of Israel should rule, as if God directly ruled, with justice and impartiality (Leviticus 19:15)."

"When this vision of the 'Rule/Kingdom of God' was not realized," Dr. Park writes, "and when the earthly rulers, be they Israelite kings or rulers of foreign empires colonizing Israel, abused their power and committed various forms of injustice against the people of God, prophets arose and proclaimed the forgotten vision of 'What would it be like if God directly

ruled?'...It reflects an intense yearning for a sociopolitical order based on the will of God for justice and fairness."¹

Simon, Andrew, James, and John lived during one of those times of foreign rule and could have been the authors of the second verse of Holly Near's song:

*There is hurting in my family
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There is wailing the whole world round*

When Jesus, who not only speaks as the prophets of old did and proclaims the need to once again ask the question "what would it be like if God directly ruled?" but who is also the manifestation of God on earth, visits them at the seashore and says "do you want to be part of this?" they *immediately* get up and go

I can feel the yearning and burning of their hearts as this invitation is laid out and I imagine them responding...

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The invitation from Jesus is so precious, and their response is equally so

Simon, Andrew, James, and John don't hear this preacher and simply respond and say "yes, we really hope that will happen – good luck, Jesus. Hope you can do it!"

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-412-23-7>

Rather, they hear Jesus' invitation and recognize they have something to offer and are willing to do so

Jesus said to them: "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

I'm not sure the disciples even really knew exactly what Jesus meant by the invitation, but what I think they heard – and what I think Jesus meant – was that these fishermen were fully equipped to offer their gifts towards the bringing about of God's kingdom

Another way of phrasing Jesus' invitation might be: If you seek to help me bring about a world in which we continue to ask and seek out "what would it be like if God directly ruled?" then I can definitely use what you have to offer

The place God was calling them to was the place where their deep gladness and their world's deep hunger met

"I can do that" seems to be the unspoken – unwritten – response of these four men and so immediately they leave what they're doing and follow Jesus

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Now, I can't ignore the coincidence that the actions taking place in our community this week have been codenamed "catch of the day" the same week our lectionary offers us this gospel story where Jesus tells his friends that they will fish for people

And, I cannot help but see a divine hand in this coincidence calling us to pay attention

I cannot help but think that this coincidence is Jesus, once again, standing in front of us and asking us the prophetic question of “what would this look like if God directly ruled?”

Because, lest we forget, when Jesus told his friends they would fish for people he meant it NOT as a directive to abduct people from their communities, engage in brutal acts of force and indiscriminate violence, and terrorize the vulnerable, rather he meant it as an invitation to help bring God’s kingdom of justice and fairness to earth as it is in heaven

Jesus stood at the shore and asked his friends to join him in creating a world of love, and grace, and mercy, and justice, and forgiveness, and this colliding of what is happening in our communities and this lectionary text is, to me, the recognition that Jesus is now placing himself directly in front of us this morning inviting us to do the same

Simon, and Andrew, and James, and John responded immediately because they knew that the place God was calling them to was the place where their deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger met

They responded with hope and maybe a bit of determination because they know the answer to the prophetic question of “what would this look like if God directly ruled?” is that it would not look like this

I can’t shake the feeling that it is not ironic that the operation is called “catch of the day” and that today’s gospel is Jesus at the lakeshore inviting his friends to fish for people, it is a holy act of remembering what the true, holy narrative of God is meant to be

And I can’t shake the feeling that this holy remembering is also our invitation to consider how we want to participate in the kingdom of God, how our deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger might be meeting in this moment

I can't say that I always know immediately how to respond to this invitation from Jesus – especially when confronted with the kind of cruelty and disregard for humanity we are experiencing in Maine and our siblings are experiencing in Minneapolis

But I sense that calling, that tugging, nudging, and yearning in my body, mind, and spirit to go a certain way and follow a certain path

To accept and follow the invitation from God to live in God's way and to seek the Kingdom of God in all that I do and say

And I may do it imperfectly,

*But, I am open and I am willing
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Will you sing with me?

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Amen.