

Leaving Home: Follow Me

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Matthew 4:12-22
on February 8, 2026, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

I.

The irony is not lost on me that months ago, I planned a sermon series called “Leaving Home” ... and then we’d spend two weeks stuck in and tucked away at home. (Ah, the providence and laughter of God!) These weeks notwithstanding, think with me if you will about times that you’ve left home – not briefly, like when you left this morning to come to the church house or when you leave for work, for errands, for play. But instead, summon to your mind an experience where you put the trappings of home in the rearview mirror and left for another adventure. Maybe you’re thinking of a memorable trip, or the time you left one long career to forge a new path. Maybe you’re thinking of a move, a shift, a split, a grief. Perhaps this recalls an ordinary time you left home and everything changed while you were away, never to be the same when you returned. Or perhaps this question reveals the fear that hits – powerfully, unable to be ignored – in the past when you have considered leaving home at all.

As you bring these experiences to mind, what do you remember about it? How did the experience of leaving feel in your mind, your heart, your body? What did these experiences teach you?

I have left homes throughout my life, but perhaps no time was as transformative to my sense of self and identity than the time I moved hundreds of miles away – physically and emotionally – to Chicago for graduate school at Northwestern. My precious parents helped me pack up all my cheap furniture and plastic bins overflowing with items I’d meticulously picked out to furnish my first apartment, and lugged it all straight up I-65 to

Illinois. (If you want a good visual, imagine David Hull driving a UHaul through downtown Chicago!) We arrived in one piece, and after some very unforgettable fits and starts, unloaded and set up my new place. Then for several days, the city was ours to discover – shopping on Michigan Avenue, a Cubs game at Wrigley Field, new restaurants, cozy coffee shops, all of it. We had the very best time. And then the time came for them to leave me in this new home. After a tearful goodbye filled with all the hugs and tips and reminders they could muster, my parents drove off and headed back down south. And I was *all alone*. It was a sensation I had never had in my life and one I'll never forget – there I was, all alone in a city of millions, and no one knew who I was. I had nowhere I needed to go, and an endless horizon (at least until grad school orientation began several days later) in which to play in this new playground of a home. This was before smartphones and trackable devices, of course, and I remember thinking I could be lying in a ditch somewhere and no one would even know!

Oh, I'd left home alright.

II.

That experience of leaving home is particular in our own ways – that is one of mine, and you have yours too, of course – but it's an experience universally understood. And leaving home is where our story of Jesus begins, right at the outset of his public ministry. Matthew says that he'd left Nazareth – not unprompted, though, for “when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee.” This isn't an insignificant detail for Matthew to include, it's central, you see. For John represented the hinge between the prophets of old and the new proclaimers of the gospel. When John is taken away, it's time for Jesus to leave home and begin.

And this new home for Jesus? Capernaum by the sea, a town on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, right near the Jordan River. It's a land familiar to the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, again signalling to the reader that this place matters too, that Jesus's life is unfolding alongside the long-dreamed plan of God for Jews and Gentiles. And the message he proclaims? "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." The call for turning and for hope would sound to the ears of his hearers like the message of John the Baptist, but from the lips of a whole new messenger.¹

As Jesus left home, so did others. They were still right where they knew – right there by the sea as fishermen would be, nets in hand, doing what they'd long known and loved, surrounded by family. How many times have they cast those nets, scooped up those fish, mended those strings? How many fish sandwiches had they eaten with Zebedee or hooks have they threaded with their brothers? How many hours had they waited patiently for a bite, coming up empty-handed or experiencing the joyful surprise of the big catch? For them, it was *quintessentially home*, you might say. There by the undulating, never-still sea – first Simon Peter and Andrew, then James and John, sons of Zebedee. "Follow me," Jesus says, "and I will make you fish for people."

Bewilderingly, they do. "Immediately they dropped their nets," Matthew tells us. "Immediately they left the boats." One right after the other – Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John – immediately, without seemingly a second of hesitation, they followed him.

We don't know how the other disciples would be called – none of the gospel writers tell us this – but we could assume that it was an experience akin to these four. All the elements were here – four men found in their work,

¹ This background information about Capernaum, Galilee, and John the Baptist came helpfully from Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion, p40-43.

with their family nearby, fully immersed in the homes of their lives, summoned into the fierce urgency of now by the One whose call changes everything. Which is to suggest that Jesus calls in the midst of our daily lives, rearranging its ordinary places and pieces of trade and tribe with a mission that cannot be ignored or interrogated.

Follow me, Jesus says, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

III.

This is one of those stories that the preacher loves. It can flex into an ordination sermon or churn into a really dazzling altar call. It can ask you to consider what are the nets you dropped when you said yes to following Jesus, and what you still carry all these years later. It offers the simple gift of the story of a call to answer, and what is more fundamental to this Christian life of discipleship than that?

I know those sermons. I've preached those sermons! But for today, for this context of "leaving home," for this revealing season of Epiphany, for these days when it feels like the ground beneath us shifts every single day and home isn't the home we once knew, for these days together, I want us to consider that Jesus doesn't just call, he gifts us with something to hold onto the Way. And it's right there in the summons.

Follow me, he says. It's a summons that's short on detail but endless on purpose and direction. A summons that takes us from where we were and transports us to where we're going. A summons that won't wait until things are just so, once we figure out what to do next: perfecting the art of fishing, or thoroughly tidying up our houses, or paying off the credit card debt, or once we're settled into a new home and ready. Rather the call to discipleship, to

follow Jesus, came to the disciples as it comes to us: in the midst of the jobs we have, the motions we're in, the homes we occupy.²

Follow me, he says. And then there's a word that isn't stated but implied as clearly as if it had been voiced by the Son of God right there on the beach. "Follow me," Jesus said to Simon and Andrew and James and John. Tucked right there in the space between the words is the soft breath of the Spirit saying, "together." *Follow me together*, Jesus says when he calls not one, but many, simultaneously, to pattern their lives on his, yes, but on his *together*. *Follow me together*, he says, when he knew this life isn't to be lived alone, not even for the savior of the world.

Follow me together: with others. In community. Among a people. *Not alone*.

It's as if Jesus knows that the individualistic lure on the Christian life will tuck away into the shadows of our hearts. It tells us that we must figure out right belief and extend right practice, and far be it if we mess up in public, right there out in full view, where others can see and judge and whisper and distance. It whispers the lie that our expression of faith is best because it's ours, and right because it's familiar. It tricks us into thinking that if we find ourselves lying in a proverbial ditch, no one will notice or care.

You see where this individualistic lie can lead. To decades of Christian expression obsessed with individual piety at the expense of collective liberation. To trading away the witness of the church for 30 pieces of silver. To power that has corrupted and cajoled and coerced and capitulated. To loneliness and languishing and forgetting who and whose we are and who we

² Peter Eaton, "Luke 5:1-11," *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*, p337.

follow most of all. To staying put, stuck in all the homes of our living, because we're terrified of what we might find if we leave.

IV.

Pastor Julie Pennington Russell tells the story this way –

“I have a friend,” she says. “He's a man in his late 60's. Rugged, burly, brilliant guy. He's always reminded me a little of the Marlboro Man. He studied at a prestigious university in the East some years ago, and then he moved to Texas to work on his doctorate. But somewhere along the way, he became addicted to cocaine – just tumbled into that dark hole. Lost his family, lost his place in graduate school, lost big pieces of himself. But somehow he washed up on the shores of a good church. And when he did, he was so fragile – he looked like he'd been "rode hard and put up wet" – as they say in Texas. But the folks in that church put their arms around that man, and slowly he started to heal, and eventually, miraculously, even reunited with his wife and children.”

“We had this couple in our home for dinner,” she says, “and the man began to talk with Tim and me about where his life was going. ‘I want to believe,’ he said, ‘that my best days aren't behind me, and that my life can still count, can still make a difference for God and Jesus.’ He sat at our table with his head in his hands. ‘I just can't help but feel like I've blown all of my best chances,’ he said. That's when his wife, who's just this wonderful, middle-aged bohemian Texas flower child kind of woman, reached over and took his hand and said – and I'll never forget this – she said, **"Baby, you've got to take your sticky fingers off that steering wheel. If God could yank Jesus out of a grave, I figure he can make something beautiful out of busted parts."**

Julie says “I tell you what – if I live to be a hundred and ten, I don't expect to hear the gospel better articulated than that.”³

V.

Of this story of Jesus's call of the disciples, Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us: “This is not a story about us. It is a story about God, and about God's ability not only to call us but also to create us as people who are able to follow – able to follow because we cannot take our eyes off the one who calls us, because he interests us more than anything else in our lives, because he seems to know what we hunger for and because he seems to be food.”⁴

Friends, as we leave the homes of our lives, may we follow Jesus together. For the kingdom of heaven has come near! Amen!

³ Story from Rev. Julie Pennington Russell as shared with me by dear friend, Rev. Alan Sherouse.

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Miracle on the Beach,” *Home By Another Way*, p40.